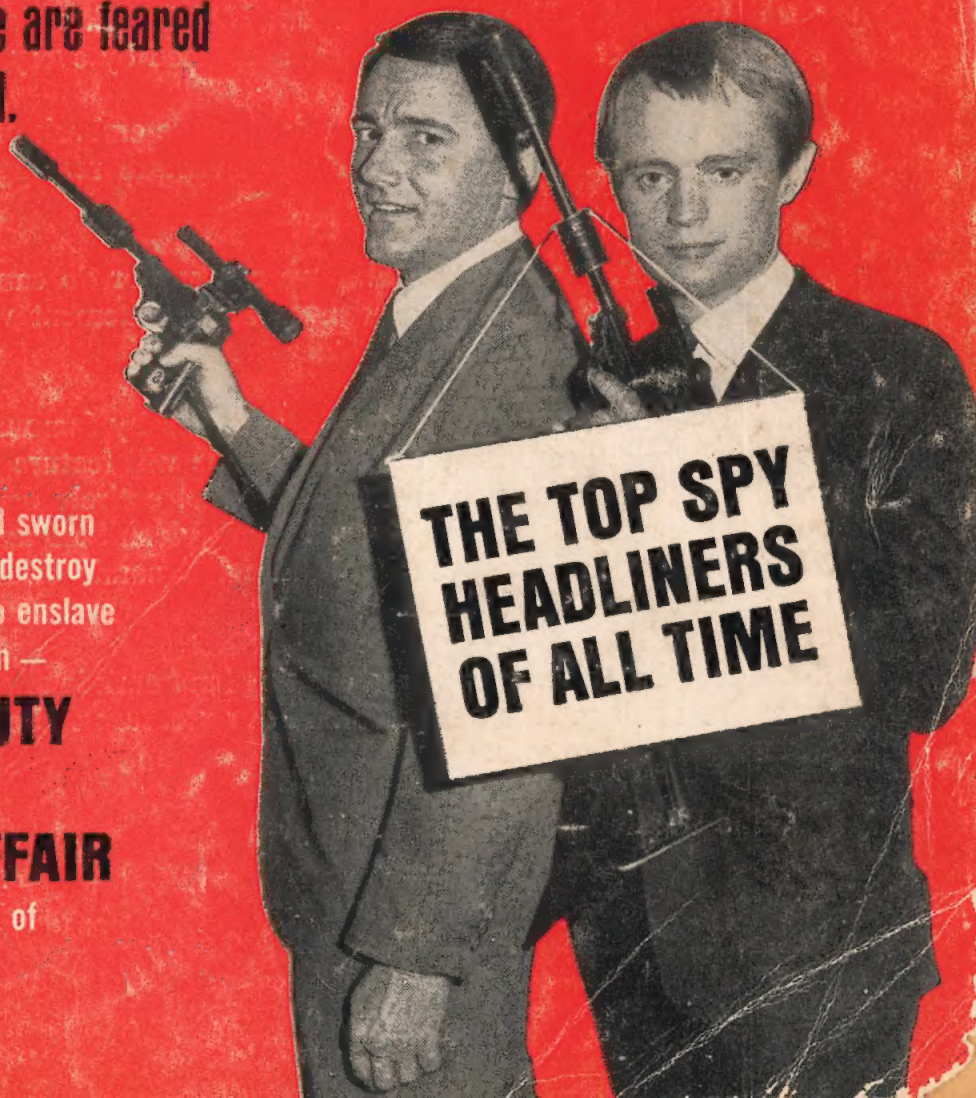
THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

MAGAZINE

MARCH 50c PDC

NAPOLEON SOLO ★ ILLYA KURYAKIN

They alone are feared by THRUSH.



Together they had sworn to seek out and destroy THRUSH'S plan to enslave the free world in —

THE BEAUTY AND BEAST AFFAIR

A Complete Novel of Shocking Terror

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EACH SEASON some new young T.V. star manages to capture the American public's heart and fancy. During the last season, a youthful Scottish character actor, who wasn't expected to, has scored a complete bull's-eye with the viewers, right in their first crush hearts.

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Good hunting—and good reading!

Leo Margulies
Publisher

THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

MARCH, 1966 Vol. 1, No. 2

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE BEAUTY AND BEAST AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Trapped, helpless, they heard the grim Thrush ultimatum beam across the airways of the world to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters: "Give us back this machine that can destroy nations—or Napoleon Solo and Illya Karyakin will die within the hour!"

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LEO MARGULIES
Publisher

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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE. Vol. 1, No. 2. March 1966. Single copies 50¢. Subscriptions $6.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $7.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by Leo Margulies Corp., 160 West 46th St., N.Y., N.Y. 10036.
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THE BEAUTY AND BEAST AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Trapped, at gunpoint, they heard THRUSH's deadly ultimatum crackle over the airways across the world: "Give us this machine which can destroy nations—or Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin die!"

ACT I—INCIDENT OF THE SLAIN AGENT

NAPOLEON SOLO and Alexander Waverly locked stunned gazes across the forgotten device they'd been inspecting in the command room at United Network headquarters.

Illya Kuryakin slain.

The incredible words erupted, sharply white, on the televised instant-bulletin screen.

Solo felt ill. Illya dead? After the first harsh moment of shocked disbelief, he sagged, immobilized by a sense of loss, deep grief. The slender young U.N.C.L.E agent brought his

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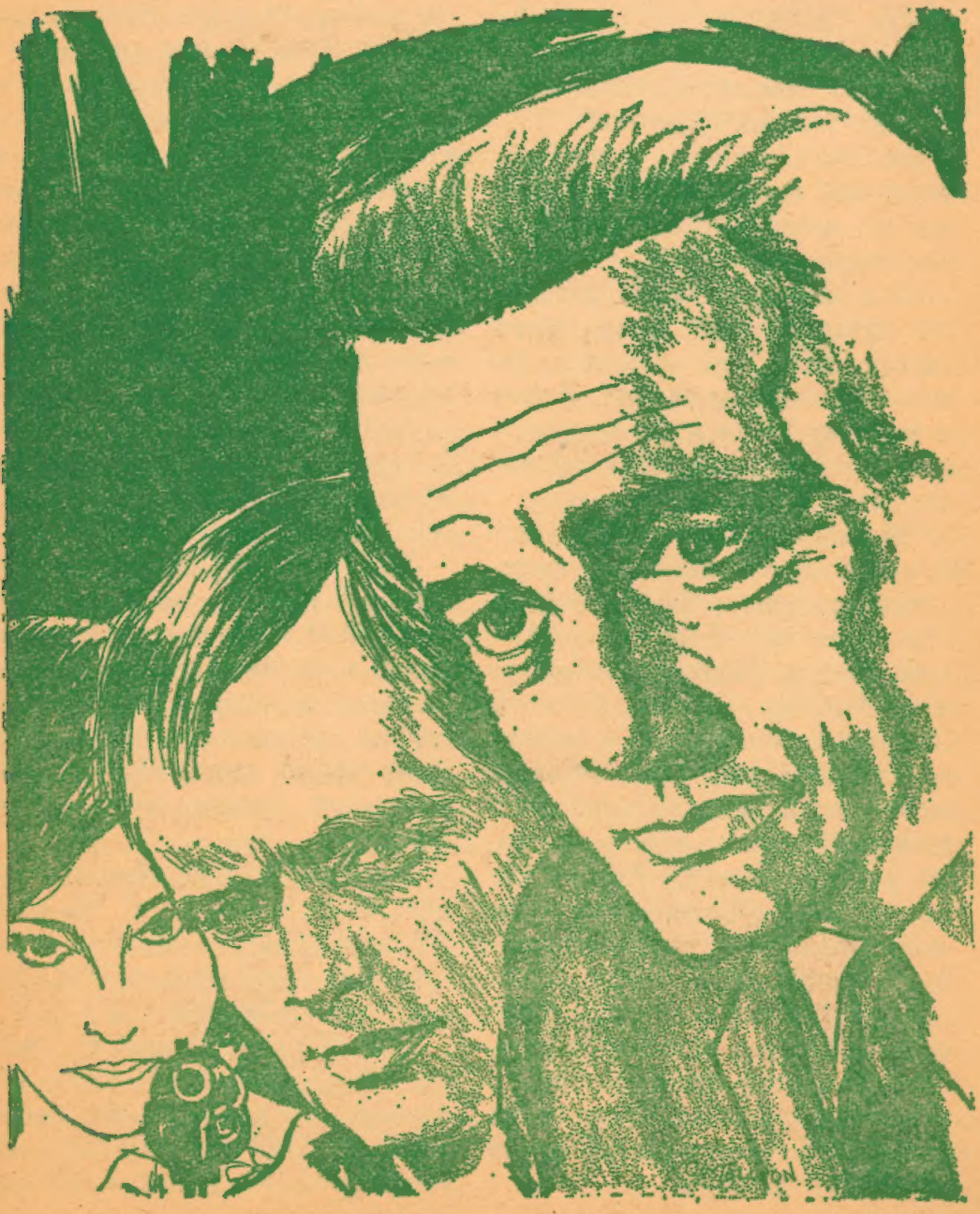
FEATURING

NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN



hand up, dragging it across his mouth. His elbow bumped the concealed shoulder holster and U.N.C.L.E. Special. Weaponry there to inflict death or to outwit it one more time. Thirty-seven ounces, including silencer—the man who carried this weapon accepted all obligations, risks. Risk of death remained constant.

But Solo's handsome young face, wry-pulled mouth, could not conceal his reaction to the impact of this tragic news.

He'd seen death strike, the violent dying of other agents, some working with him, all under his immediate command, but at this moment he felt as if the very rock of Manhattan Island might sink under him.

"It can't be!" Alexander Waverly spoke in unconcealed outrage.

Solo saw grief in the old soldier's face. Now one of the five men—each from a different mother nation—heading United Network Command, Waverly was a veteran of two world wars. He wore every medal and honor, many bestowed post-war by former enemy nations, for gallantry, bravery beyond the call of duty. Waverly had been embroiled most of his life in hand-to-hand combat with violent death.

Waverly's hand still gripped the activating switch of the atom-separator he'd been demonstrating.

They stared at the screen as the first bulletin was replaced by an amplifying message:

"Kuryakin and woman evangelist Ann Nelson Wheat have been executed as spies in Middle-East Zabir by order of Sheik Ali Zud—"

"No!" The word burst across Waverly's mouth. "Sheik Zud himself invited Illya into Zabir as an advisor. This is vilest treachery!"

For one more moment Waverly glared at the atom-separator as if it were somehow guilty. Built like a portable television set, with narrowing barrel instead of screen, the machine gleamed metallically in a room of metal machines, senders, receivers, monitors. The command room was the heart muscle of this huge, never-sleeping organization—United Command for Law and Enforcement—spread across the face of the globe, and via electronics into far reaches of space.

The Network Command building, unobtrusive in the Forties near the United Nations complex, was linked with the remotest areas by means of elaborate sending and receiving antennae concealed on its roof, and by secret channels underground, leading to the East River.

Solo tried to remember that urgent business came first. He said, "You were saying that this atom-separator came from a THRUSH agent who defected to U.N.C.L.E."

"Yes." Grimly, Waverly too made the effort. "Only the scientist—his name was Polar Fuch—didn't quite make it. THRUSH had him—uh—removed. He invented the ma-

chine, he told me, for peaceful aims, but it has a lethal application, and when he found this was the use THRUSH meant to make of it—"

Waverly gestured downward sharply. "No. It's no good. We'll discuss this thing later."

He swung around to his desk, slapped at the inter-com buttons. He spoke in a cold, flat tone that dared his subordinates even to question his command: "I want the ambassador from Zabir in the conference suite. Within the hour. Do you understand? Within the hour."

TWO

ZABIR'S AMBASSADOR Zouida Berikeen looked across the long conference table at the chilled faces of Napoleon Solo and Alexander Waverly.

His heavily accented voice broke, pleadingly: "But I have counted you as my closest friends. Both of you. I shall remain indebted beyond death to you, Solo, for saving my life. Need I remind you? And Alexander—friend since the evil days of the Dardanelles, before my poor little nation even was born!"

"We are not here to talk over old times." Waverly's voice remained implacable. His expression did not alter. His relentless gaze bore into Zouida's face. He nodded toward Solo. "Can you think of any good you could say of this man?"

Solo shrugged, his face also chilled. "Well, he got here in less than an hour."

"So we give him one mark—or one lash—for punctuality," Waverly said icily. "He has fortitude I never suspected, to face us at all after such treachery."

Zouida Berikeen scrubbed his hands over his face. He wore the uniform of the diplomat: morning coat, creased black trousers, stiff shirt. But his hair was uncombed, and sleep showed in the corners of his black eyes. He was a small man, swarthy, and deeply tortured.

"My old friends," he pleaded. "Can't you believe I know no more of this—very little more—than you do? Just what came via bulletin from my poor nation. That's all."

"You said you knew a little more," Solo said grimly. "How little?"

Zouida licked at his mouth. "A direct communique with my ruler, the King of Lions, Sheik Zud, asked only that Napoleon Solo come to Zabir to collect the mortal remains, effects and belongings of the lamented Illya Kuryakin. And

The complete novels depicting the amazing adventures of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakim and the rest of the famous cast of characters making up the great organization known as United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—are especially written, entirely brand-new and inspired by the tremendously exciting MGM-ARENA popular television series—"The Man From U.N.C.L.E."

this bit more—that Sheik Zud is himself bereaved."

"He ordered the execution!" Waverly lashed out.

"True." Zouida paced the carpeting across the table from the agents. "But reluctantly, and with great heartsickness. We all loved Illya Kuryakin. Whatever his crime—and I swear to Allah, and to your own gods—I don't know what it was. Spying. It must have been heinous to force Sheik Zud to take such dreadful action."

Waverly waved his hand. "And this woman, this evangelist, Ann Nelson Wheat? What of her? Was she spying too?"

Zouida nodded, his face showing inner torments. "Yes. She is from your Los Angeles. She has a great following, much like your Billy Graham. The young college students in our country—rebellious as they seem to be all over the world today—want to know more about your religion. Sheik Zud invited this woman, Ann Nelson Wheat, into Zabir. He would let her explain Christianity to the people of Zabir, so they would know what it was—though of course, Zabir and Sheik Zud know only the true God, Mohammed his prophet—"

"And what was the Wheat woman's crime?" Solo prompted.

"Spying. She must have forgotten she was our guest as a religious woman. She was caught photographing secret installations—"

"And what kind of trial did she get?" Waverly said, leaning forward at the high-glossed table.

Zouida shrugged. "The sheik is a headstrong man, of some violence when aroused." He paused, added almost defiantly, "But he is a good man, better even than he believes."

"Yes," Solo said in irony. "He has a great record."

Tears brimmed the little ambassador's eyes. "Sheik Zud's problems are complex, difficult to comprehend unless you face them. Please do not judge this good, but hard-pressed man, until you know him better. His goodness lights the desert. I ask only that you suspend judgment until Napoleon Solo returns with his report."

When they were alone in the long conference room, both Solo and Waverly sat some moments without moving.

At last Waverly got up and paced the floor, face rutted with thought. "So Sheik Zud—whose goodness lights the desert and whose treachery turns my stomach—wants me to send you to fetch the effects and remains of Illya Kuryakin."

"I'll be pleased to go, Alexander."

"Oh, I'm sure you would. This is one little trip I'd like to take with you." Looking at Waverly, Solo was reminded of a bulldog with the ruff standing at its shoulders. "But we've got to be dispassionate about this. If we act in haste, or in rage, we may be walking into just the

mistakes Sheik Zud might be hoping we'll make."

"I would be most alert," Solo said with some savagery.

"I'm positive of this, too. But I've made my decision. Where is Wanda Mae Kim?"

Solo's mouth sagged open. "On assignment. Why?"

The faintest smile tugged at Waverly's mouth. "Oh, I understand your consternation. No, I'm not senile. No more than usual, anyhow. I realize as well as you, Solo, that Wanda worked in our outer offices, and is the newest of your recruits—"

"On the least urgent of all assignments," Solo reminded him.

Waverly straightened. "I've made my decision, Solo. Zabir and Sheik Zud will anticipate my sending you to collect Illya's belongings. Since, as you say, Wanda handles only the most petty assignments, surely she won't be missed on whatever occupies her. Bring her in to me at once."

Solo gazed at Waverly incredulously, then he straightened and nodded. He had his orders.

* * *

THE UNITED Command helicopter hovered for a moment above the west-side tenement building. On the seat beside the pilot, Solo gazed down at the grime-crusted buildings, the crowded early-afternoon streets.

He said, "Can you put her down on this roof?"

The pilot nodded. He was a dark-haired man in his twenties, with a devil-may-care smile for any peril. "I can put her down anywhere. That's why you hired me. Remember?"

"Knew there must have been some reason," Solo said. He spoke over his shoulder to the three agents in the dome cabin. "Hang on. Sunday Driver is going to chop his way in through the clothes-lines."

Sunday Driver grinned, settled the chopper easily to the black roofing. Pigeons fluttered up in panic and a cloud of dust and debris smoked upward.

Solo opened the plastic door and swung down. He checked his vest-pocket sender for channel and efficiency.

"Sit tight," he told his agents. "I won't be a minute."

"If there's any glory in it, or a chance for a raise, call me, will you?" one of the agents called after Napoleon Solo, grinning.

"Don't forget we're double-parked," the pilot called.

Solo didn't glance back. He went through the stairway door, down to the fifteenth floor without hesitation, aware that doors were cracked open, his progress followed.

On the fifteenth floor, he strode directly to a door at the end of the shabby corridor.

He removed a small, conelike device from his pocket, placed it against the door facing. Sounds came through subdued, but as clearly as if he were on the inner side of the wall.

Moving smoothly, but without undue haste, he took a cylinder much like a hair-spray refill tube from his jacket. Placing it at the edge of the door, he sprayed around it in a continuous movement from floor upward and across the top, down the other side.

The fluid ate away the wood like concentrated acid on metal. The door quivered. Solo touched it with the tip of his finger, and it fell away into the room.

Solo's first view of that interior was less than reassuring.

His gaze was drawn to Wanda Mae Kim.

Wanda Mae was outlandishly decorative under any conditions, and she managed to be eye-catching even in the trying circumstances in which she had managed to become involved.

She was not only involved, she was entangled. Her trim ankles were secured by leather leashes to almost opposite poles of the room. Her China-gold arms were stretched by other leashes high above her head.

She lay like the black-haired, ruby-mouthed adornment of the center of a particularly unappetizing bargain-basement carpeting. Her eyes, like dark opals, were wide with terror.

Her form-clinging skirt had been ripped up the side; her dragon-embroidered blouse was torn, smudged with dirt. A streak of dirt was like a scar across the glaze of her ceramic-smooth cheeks.

Even so, she was bewitching.

This could not be said for the other occupants of the room.

They were grouped about her, each with his own sadistic weapon of torture. There were four of them, one wearing the blue uniform of the New York City police force.

He was as intent upon torture as his three comrades. He knelt beside Wanda, holding the bright tip of a cigarette within inches of her eyes. Her beauty left him unmoved. His florid face sweated with concentration.

This was true of all of them. They had little in common except the evil in their faces, the tools of torment in their fists—and the common bond of their vile racket.

A slender, sunken-chested man brandished a thin, narrow whip,

cracking it within inches of Wanda's bared golden legs. A stout, balding man in plaid jacket and ankle-length slacks held a dripping hypodermic and needle. The youngest, swarthy, greasy-haired, black bangs eye-length, waited with a switch-blade knife for his turn.

So intent upon their prisoner were the four thugs that the door fell, air whipping across them, before they reacted.

They lunged around, and the cop leaped to his feet, going for the gun at his holster.

Wanda saw Solo first. Her straight, shoulder-length black hair waved as she rolled her head back and forth in anguish, crying out, "I didn't tell them anything! I didn't!"

Solo spared her only a brief glance that warned he'd deal with her later for her fearful breach of direct orders.

Since the cop had reacted first, Napoleon Solo gave him his immediate attention.

He did not draw the U.N.C.L.E. Special from its shoulder holster.

Instead he drew from his inner jacket pocket what appeared to be a wallet. But when he pressed its safety catch, a barrel the length of the wallet plunged outward. He fired it by pressing the same catch, so his movement was fluid, and no time was wasted.

There was a sharp sound like *"thid!"*

A pellet erupted from the barrel and struck the cop squarely in the neck.

It was as if the big man had been stung by a wasp in flight. He threw his right hand up, slapping at the place he'd been struck. His hand closed on his neck—and he found himself unable to withdraw it. In those brief seconds the pellet's fluid had stunned him, and he stood immobile, his hand grasping at his neck. He tried to move and he could not.

The long-haired boy was next, because his reactions were fastest. The boy wheeled around, stared for a moment at Solo. In that instant, his reactions named Solo enemy, and he lowered his hand to his side to hurl the knife in a fierce underhanded pitch directly at Solo's buckle. It would have seemed impossible for him to miss at this close range.

Perhaps it would have been, except that the second pellet from Solo's nerve-gun caught the boy in the center of his bangs. It struck at the moment he'd started his upswing and the knife floated harmlessly past Solo's head.

The boy tried to straighten, but he remained as if frozen in that unbalanced pose, arm extended.

The other two men apparently were on junk, Solo decided. Their reactions were slow, less than deliberate, though obviously each thought he was moving with the speed of light.

The stout man came around in an almost languid movement, slashing at Solo with the whip, brandishing it.

Solo let him take two steps away from where Wanda was secured to the floor. He pressed the safety, watched the pellet strike the stout man in the belly. He gasped, as if unable to breathe, and then stood rigid, whip high in upreaching arm.

The thin man flicked the lighted cigarette directly into Solo's face.

Solo side-stepped deftly. The tall man leaped toward a straight chair, reaching out for it.

Solo pressed the button. The pellet splatted just behind the tall man's outsized ear. He bent forward another three inches and then ceased all movement, arms outstretched, eyes distended.

On the floor, Wanda sobbed in relief.

Solo still did not glance toward her. He surveyed the room, finding the evidence that United Network Command had been after. He collected it carefully.

Wanda's tear-wet eyes widened as he watched him.

When he had everything he wanted, Napoleon Solo checked the unmoving men.

Pleased, he removed the vest-pocket sender, spoke into it. "Sunday Driver. Sunday Driver. Caesar here. Four passengers. One way. Come and pick them up. Over and out."

He recoiled the barrel of the pellet gun, folded what now looked like a wallet again and replaced it in his inner pocket.

Wanda said hesitantly, from the floor, "What have you done to them?"

"Neuroquixonal," Solo answered without looking at her. "Just stunned them. We'll let the police have them after the boys at Command have worked them over."

"They—tortured me," Wanda said in that hesitant tone.

He shrugged. "You asked for it."

At this moment, the three standby agents entered the room. One of them laughed. "What have you done, Solo? Robbed Madame Taussaud's wax-works?"

"Yeah," said another. "And get a gander at that China doll somebody forgot and left on the floor."

"Very funny!" Wanda cried savagely from the floor, fighting at her bonds.

Solo loosened the leashes, quickly, as the agents carried out the prisoners.

"Head 'em out," he said.

Wanda sat up, her lovely lip quivering. She massaged at her reddened wrists. "They tortured me, boss," she said. "But I didn't tell them anything. Honest."

Solo was giving the room one last quick check.

"I only wanted to make you proud of me!" Wanda wept.

Solo looked at her now. She seemed to shrink under the heat of his gaze. He shrugged, kept his

voice low. He held out his hand, lifting her to her feet.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

THREE

"So THIS IS what kept you!" Waverly prowled the Command room, glaring from time to time at Wanda, who was huddled in his chair. She looked small, dejected. "Why didn't you let those junkies finish her off?"

"I was strongly tempted," Solo said mildly.

"I thought I was doing the right thing, sir," Wanda whispered timidly.

Waverly turned and stared down at her across his desk. "The right thing? Deliberately, wilfully disobeying direct orders? Is this your notion of doing the right thing, young woman? If it is, we've been sadly remiss in your instructions."

"I was told what to do," Wanda admitted breathlessly.

Waverly nodded. "I'm sure you were. And what was that?

"To—watch them, sir. And to—report."

"Watch! And report!" Each word was like the crack of a high-powered rifle directed at her.

"Report, yes, sir."

"Report," Waverly said "That means tell us what you saw; not get yourself trapped, tied up, and our whole operation exposed."

"I didn't tell them anything, sir!" Wanda protested.

"No. You didn't. No thanks to your native stoicism, but to the timely arrival of Mr. Solo. No, I can't rate you very highly on this performance, young woman."

"Please, sir, listen to me! I was so sure I could take them. You see, this policeman promised to help me."

"Policeman!" Waverly looked as if he might suffer a stroke. "You took the city police into your confidence? Told him what you were after?"

"He seemed so nice, so anxious to help."

"Anxious to help?" Now Waver-

ly turned, staring at Solo for some explanation.

"He was one of the gang, sir," Solo said mildly.

Waverly seemed unable to speak for some moments. Wanda sat with her face pressed into her hands, watching them through her splayed fingers, her velvet-dark eyes alight with fear.

"Well, Solo," Waverly said at last. "She promoted into your section—enforcement. You're her immediate superior. What can you say in her defense?"

"She's—very pretty," Solo said noncommittally. "However, I would say she is not ready for the —uh, larger assignments."

"Perhaps she is," Waverly said without sympathy. "Perhaps next time she'll get herself disposed of completely. Then we can write a nice, comforting letter home to her people."

"Just one more chance, Mr. Waverly," Wanda begged. "On my soul, on my illustrious ancestors, I swear—"

"Save your breath. Change your clothes and wash your face," Waverly told her. "I still haven't made up my mind—"

"About my next assignment?" she said hopefully.

"Hardly," he told her. "My problem is more complex. Whether to shoot you in front of the U.N. building, or simply deport you."

Later, Wanda sat beside Solo at the table in the conference room. She seemed smaller, more fragile than ever in the oversized, leather-covered chairs. In beaded black blouse and matching slacks, she looked like the ultimate in a doll-maker's secret formula for Oriental beauty.

Solo patted her hand. She could see he had not forgiven her, but he let her see that he was compassionate.

She gave him a weak smile, but did not speak. She had not spoken since she had entered the room.

At the end of the table, Alexander Waverly sat beside a transcribing machine that clattered politely, making notes of everything the ambassador from Zabir was saying.

Zouida Berikeen had been talking for a long time. When he smiled, as if convinced he had covered everything, either Solo or Waverly would fire another question at him.

"Zabir is four hundred square miles. One million population. Most of it is concentrated in Omar, our principal city and national capitol. The country is poor for farming, most of it desert. There is little industry. But because of the oil, Zabir is one of the richest of the small nations.

"We have hostile neighbors; Xanra to the east of us has a queen who loathes our great Sheik Zud, would do anything to destroy him. We are not a happy nation. We never have been. But we must

fight all our enemies if we are to exist."

Zouida sighed and ceased speaking.

"Who heads your country's secret police?" Solo asked.

Zouida nodded gravely. "You would be meeting him when you arrived in Zarib," the ambassador said. "His name is Kiell. While I personally may not like Kiell, I have greatest respect for him. He would give his life without question for our Sultan Zud. I would like to feel I too would die for the great King of Lions, but I am more timid.

"Kiell is a brave man, almost foolhardy. He is of medium height, as dark as I. He has thick hair, but only at his temples and sides and crown. This gives him the look of one with extremely high, slick forehead. His nose is hooked, his face generally round, and he wears a thick moustache. I assure you, Kiell lives only for his country and his sultan."

"I look forward to meeting him," Solo said. "With all your briefings, you very carefully have not described the physical appearance of your sultan. Haven't you ever seen him face to face?"

Zouida stared at Solo, stricken. "I have prostrated myself at his feet—he wears size thirteen American shoes. He formerly bought his boots in London. What can I say of his appearance?"

Solo stared at the man's gray face. "Are you afraid to describe him? Why? Is he actually so terribly ugly—"

"Ahhh!" The word burst from Zouida's lips. "Please. He is a great man, of great goodness of heart, plagued by heinous problems. He rules his country wisely, compassionately. He has forty-seven wives, all of whom he took into slavery before he would marry them. Though each was enslaved, all would now die for him—all attest to his purity, and greatness of heart."

Solo laughed. "You sound like the Zarib chamber of commerce, or else you're so afraid these confidential reports will get somehow to your Sheik, and you're so afraid of telling us the truth about his looks that—"

"Please, Mr. Solo!" Zouida looked ready to weep. "Is beauty everything? Or is beauty from the inside? If so, then Sheik Ali Zud is truly beautiful."

Solo laughed. "What you're saying is that Zud looks like a pig, but you're afraid to say it aloud. Relax, Zouida, he'll never hear what goes on in this room."

Zouida Berikeen was finally permitted to depart. When he was gone, Waverly sat chewing on his pipe, staring at Wanda's doll-like face.

Solo followed the direction of Waverly's thoughts and spoke urgently. "I suggest, sir, that we follow the alternate plan, that we

allow me to handle this matter alone."

"That's what they want us to do," Waverly said.

"But, sir, we've hundreds of agents. In all parts of the world, none of them known to Sheik Zud—"

"Wonder what he looks like," Wanda said suddenly.

"Who?" Both Waverly and Solo twisted in their chairs, staring at her.

Realizing she had interrupted again, Wanda shrank into the huge chair, her eyes wide. She bit her lip.

But they stared at her, waiting. Finally, she knew she had to speak. "I wondered about Sheik Zud, sir. He sounded kind, even if he did order poor Illya executed. But it's so strange."

"Yes?" Waverly's voice was dangerously quiet.

"I mean, no pictures of the Sheik. No paintings or photos. The Sheik forbids it, on pain of death. Why would he do that?"

"I'm strongly tempted to send you over there with a camera to find out," Waverly told her.

She took him seriously. "Oh, please do, sir!"

Both Waverly and Solo stared at her, at each other, helplessly.

Finally, Waverly stood up, prowling the room, scratching at his jaw with the pipe stem. "I think we should send her. Now listen with all your mind, girl, and pray you do not misunderstand one word. I am sending you, by plane, tonight to Zarib."

"Oh, thank you!"

"Wait until you get back to thank me. Now you can look at Mr. Solo's disapproving face and see that he believes I am making my most serious tactical blunder of my career. But I ask myself, isn't this what Ambassador Zouida Berikeen would think, what Zud would think, what anyone in his right mind would think? So, it seems I should send you. No one could suspect you are there for any purpose. They couldn't learn anything from you—because you don't know anything. do you?"

"Oh, no, sir!" Wanda agreed.

"Then listen carefully. Your life may depend on your following orders to the letter. Do you understand? Not only your life, but Mr. Solo's life, and the success of our whole plan to learn the truth about what's going on in that kingdom."

"Mr. Solo is going with me," Wanda whispered in delight.

"Correction!" Waverly said sternly. "Mr. Solo will fly on the same plane with you. He will go into Zarib with you, or soon after. But you do not know him. He is a stranger to you. You are not to speak to him. Do not contact him, no matter what happens. Do you understand? *No matter what happens.* Silence between you. No look that would betray either of you. You must not fail. You must obey

my orders. Do not speak to Solo, even if you—or he—is in deadly peril."

"I promise," Wanda whispered. "I swear."

She folded her arms across her breasts, tautly, head tilted.

"Save your breath," Waverly advised. "Now, your sole job is to collect Illya's effects, his body if possible. That's all."

"I'll do it," Wanda cried. "I loved Illya—and this time, I won't fail. I'll do it just as you say. They can kill me, and I won't cry out to Mr. Solo."

"I hope so," Alexander Waverly said, but there wasn't much conviction in his tone. He was following a hunch, acting on instinct, but he somehow felt it was like trusting an aching corn to predict a hurricane.

FOUR

THE AIR FRANCE jet streaked south and east across the troubled European skies.

Napoleon Solo checked his disguise in the washroom mirror. It was simplicity itself, yet he was certain it was effective. Gray-tinted contact lenses had changed the color of his eyes. A graying wig added ten years to his age and the rimless glasses gave him the look of a kindly Mr. Chips on a schoolmaster's holiday.

He straightened and turned away to the door. The distant roar of the jet engines set a trembling through the fusilage. Hand on the knob, he hesitated. Much about this journey troubled him, but one thing really bugged him: how was Wanda Mae Kim going to react under fire?

His life, and his success in Zarib, depended on her following orders. He determined to test her at once.

He stepped out into the passageway, walking with the slightly stooped, hesitant movement of a middle-aged schoolteacher on what was likely his first plane flight.

He paused beside the chair where Wanda Mae sat with the latest issue of a movie fan magazine on her knees. She wore an exotic traveling suit of olive, her gleaming hair was done in a lacquered roll.

He gave her a faintly lecherous grin and said, "Hello, honey. May I sit here by you?"

Wanda's head jerked up and she gazed at him.

His heart sank. It was almost as if he could follow her thought processes. First, she hit the panic switch. He had the terrible premonition that she was going to warn him aloud that they were strangers, and not supposed to speak.

Then he was afraid that she didn't really recognize him. And then when her eyes widened, he saw she did.

He thought emptily, well, it's better for the whole foolish scheme to fall apart here in the plane rather than after they put down in Zarib.

But in these same swift seconds,

he saw her recover. She found her lost poise, remembered her orders, and reacted like a soldier in the trenches.

"I'm sorry, sir!" she said loudly. "You've made some kind of mistake in the kind of girl you think I am. If you persist in pushing your unwanted attentions on me, I'll have to call the steward!"

Solo retreated, almost stumbling, aware of the amused glances of the passengers near them.

Sighing in relief, Solo straightened, barely able to conceal his own pleased smile. He made a mental note to buy Wanda a steak dinner if they ever got back to New York.

When he turned toward his own seat, he saw that a young woman had moved into the chair beside his.

Solo caught his breath. To say she was a young woman was understatement. She was authentic, contemporary female perfection, thoughtfully designed. There was elegance about her, from trim slippers to upswept platinum hair. What she was was living proof that long flights don't have to be dull.

She smiled up at him. She wore a beige skirt which moulded the planes of her hips and legs. She'd removed her matching jacket, although the pressurized cabin had seemed chilled to Solo until this moment.

Something in her wide hazel eyes challenged a man to take positive action.

Solo forgot his masquerade as a kindly Mr. Chips and swung into the chair beside her as if enroute to excitement.

"Frisky, aren't you?" she teased. Her voice carried built-in impact.

Napoleon Solo winced, remembering his graying wig, rimless glasses.

He smacked his lips, working his way to meet her gaze. "Fellow like me, miss, doesn't see a girl like you every day."

"Nobody does," she said casually. "Not every day."

"Ain't that the swinging truth," he agreed.

"Oh, you are a naughty old schoolteacher, aren't you?"

He appeared to blush timidly. "As my boys say in the fourth form. And speaking of forms, you're certainly in the first form, aren't you?" He cackled with laughter, peering over the top of his rimless glasses at her. "But how in this world did you ever know I was a schoolteacher?"

"It was just a guess." She laughed. "You didn't have much luck with the little China doll, did you?"

He gazed at his seat partner admiringly. "No, thank heavens, I didn't."

"Watch it, Mr. Chips. Your glasses are steaming up."

"Finch," he said. "My name. Armistead Finch."

She frowned. "Armistead Finch?"

"The third." He held out his hand. She shook it limply and

dropped it. "What's your name, my dear?"

"Pretty Wilde," she told him.

Solo emitted that cackling laugh again. "Oh, no, my dear. Your *name.*"

She laughed at him. "Down, tiger. That is my name, Mr. Finch. At least it's my stage name. Pretty Wilde."

"Oh? You're on the stage?" he said, punching the rimless glasses up on his nose. "With fans, I'll bet."

"You are a naughty one, aren't you? I'll have to keep you in after classes, Mr. Finch. No, I was a model. I do interpretive dancing, ballet."

"What are you doing this far away from home, my dear?"

"I'm on my way to Zabir," she said.

Solo's expression did not alter; he kept that same fatuous smile. But he could not pretend surprise. Somehow, when he had seen her occupying the chair beside his, he'd been certain he would hear that Zabir was her destination.

"I've been invited into Zabir by Sheik Zud himself," she said with pride. "You know he has forty-seven wives?"

"I never met him. No."

"Neither have I. But he is paying me fabulously to come to Omar—that's his capitol city—and teach etiquette, dress and dancing to his wives. Doesn't that sound exciting?

"I've heard that there's some internal trouble in Zabir," Solo said

in his pedantic tone. "Border incidents. Aren't you frightened?"

Pretty Wilde put her lovely head back, laughing. "Why should I be? I've got the sheik himself protecting me."

"That's what I mean," Solo said.

She laughed even louder. He looked her over again, buying her story: it was plausible. Zud put his women in bondage before he married them; every one of his marriages had been forced upon the wife. Perhaps he would want them taught the niceties of manners and hospitality.

He shrugged. He had enough on his mind without worrying whether Pretty Wilde was less, or more, than met the eye.

"I beg your pardon there, you too!" The boisterous voice of the stocky man from across the aisle ripped in between Solo and Pretty Wilde. "I couldn't help noticing the way you two folks were laughing and enjoying yourselves. Pleasure to watch you folks."

He stood up, leaning upon the seat ahead of them, swaying slightly

with the motion of the jet. He was in his thirties, Solo reckoned, heavy, with a round, balding head, thick brows and aggressive smile. He wore a plaid jacket and gray slacks.

He held out his card. "Ordwell Slybrough," he said. "Cadillac and Oldsmobile overseas. Middle East. On my way to Zabir." Solo tightened instinctively. Everybody was on his way to Zabir suddenly.

"Yes, sir," Slybrough went on. "Going to call on Sheik Zud himself. Tell you why. Hear the old fellow has forty-seven wives. I'll bet he looks older than he is!" He slapped his thigh, laughing. "Heard he drives nothing but Rolls Royces. Thought I might get him to change his brand for his favorite wives."

Slybrough roared with laughter again. "Sell forty-seven cars in one deal! How about that? Tidy little commission, huh? Go on, take my card."

Reluctantly, Napoleon Solo reached out and took the card. The instant his hand touched it, the card ignited, burst into flames, consumed.

Ordwell Slybrough almost fell down in the aisle laughing.

Solo dropped the flaming paper, slapping at it.

Ordwell hung on to the seat ahead of them, laughing. "Special treated paper. The friction caused by you taking it toward your face to read ignites it! Always good for a laugh."

Solo and Pretty Wilde glanced at each other, trying not to look annoyed.

Ordwell said loudly, "Come on to the lounge. Let me buy you a drink. Show no hard feelings." He reached over, got his briefcase and handed it to Pretty Wilde. "Open it up. Want to show you folks some cute pictures of my wife and kids."

Sighing to cover her impatience, Pretty said in irony, "You meet such interesting people on these long flights."

"That's the truth, honey!" Ordwell said. "Open it up."

Pretty Wilde unsnapped the briefcase lid. She cried out as the top flew up and a stuffed crocodile was catapulted upward into her face.

She caught the briefcase and stuffed animal up and threw them past Solo at the salesman.

This time Ordwell laughed so hard that he did topple over the arm of his chair. People were standing up to stare at them. Only Wanda remained rigid in her chair, staring straight ahead, Solo saw.

Ordwell laughed, panting for breath. He extended his arms.

"Help me up there, partner!" he gasped at Solo.

Solo stood up, but instead of taking the stout man's upraised arms, he lifted him by the armpits, holding him for a moment off the floor before he set him down.

"Take it easy, Pop," Ordwell said uncomfortably, but still smiling. "Just a laugh. No harm meant.

Come on, let me buy you folks a drink."

Solo glanced questioningly at Pretty Wilde. The lovely young woman shrugged and stood up. They went aft to the small bar and the half-moon leather seat. As they sat down, Ordwell drew a cigar from his jacket pocket, offered Solo one.

Solo refused. Ordwell laughed. "Scared to trust me, eh? No, friend, I don't believe in trick cigars. Old stuff, huh?"

Solo shrugged, watching him put the flame of a gold cigarette lighter to the cigar, and slowly take one long pull at it.

Suddenly the cigar erupted, bursting in Ordwell's face, turning it black. But this was only the start. Small bright flares exploded like swarms of gnats.

Crying out, Ordwell hurled the cigar against the far wall and leaped to his feet.

He glared down at Solo, eyes distended in his soot-blackened face.

"You did that!" he bellowed, trembling with rage. "Put a pill of some kind in my cigar, didn't you? Wondered why you wouldn't just help me up, had to make a production out of it! Some joke! I ought to take a poke at you!"

"Sure," Solo said, grinning flatly. "Step outside—and wait for me."

Ordwell Slybrough stared down at him a moment, then turned on his heel and strode away, shouting back at all the plane passengers and personnel, who were applauding Napoleon Solo.

ACT II
INCIDENT OF THE DOUBLE AGENT

"GOOD EVENING. This is your steward. As you perceive, the no-smoking light is on, as is the warning to fasten your seat belts, please. We are coming into the Inetrnational Airport of Kurbot, on the border of Zabir. Our passengers for Zabir will disembark here. Others continuing with us to Xanra and Iran will remain aboard. Please keep seat belts fastened until the plane is on the runway before the debarking center and all engines are off. We have enjoyed serving you, and—"

Napoleon Solo exhaled heavily, stealing a quick glance toward Wanda. She sat erect, businesslike. For no good reason, he felt a rush of sorrow for her. She seemed so small. On the other hand, this was a career she'd chosen for herself. Death remained a constant risk. Well, she'd passed her first tests. He hoped she'd pass the others.

His jaw tightened. He couldn't worry about her. Finding out the truth about Illya's death and the unrest inside Zabir would be a full-time operation, requiring all his attention. He would only endanger both of them, and the whole objective, unless he put her entirely out of his mind.

He could not help glancing toward her after she came off the wind-tortured steps, holding her pert little hat with one hand and her brief skirt with the other as she crossed the runway toward the waiting rooms. With her diplomatic pass from United Network she was spared the long struggle through customs.

As schoolmaster-on-a-holiday Armistead Finch, Solo was completely entangled in custom's red-tape.

He heard Pretty Wilde complaining to officials behind her about the delays.

"I've been brought here by Sheik Zud himself," she kept telling them in outraged tones.

All she got from them were shrugs and repeated, "Sorry, no English, thank you."

He glanced around, but saw the practical joking salesman nowhere. He shrugged, grinning faintly at the memory of that exploding cigar, Ordwell's stalking away in frustrated rage.

Finally, Solo worked his way to the main concourse exit. Pretty Wilde's voice snagged at him. "Good-bye Professor. Hope you have a nice vacation and catch a lot of pretty girls."

He nodded, peering over the tops of his rimless glasses at her. "Same to you, Pretty. Hope you have no trouble at all teaching the sultan's forty-seven wives a thing or two."

"Want me to put in a good word for you with the sheik?" Pretty asked.

He managed to play the schoolteacher to the end, smiling. "Pretty, I can't think of a thing that sheik could do for me." He let his gaze admire her openly. "He just isn't my type."

Pretty laughed. "Though he might have some slightly-used wives lying around—"

He said, smacking his lips, "You've ruined all other women for me."

He watched her progress along the concourse, aware that this was a chore he shared with all males in the place, even the oldest, hunkered in their burnooses. She lighted the tiredest eyes, speaking a language understood by every man she passed.

He watched her step aside suddenly, and his gaze pulled unwillingly from her to the long column of green-clad soldiers sharp-stepping in columns of fours. They carried field packs, wore helmet-liners, carried gleaming new rifles, bayonets fixed. They looked combat ready, except that boots and uniforms appeared catalogue fresh.

He jerked his gaze back, but Pretty Wilde had disappeared. She was gone as though she'd never existed except as a figment of an overheated imagination.

It suddenly occurred to him that he had no idea what had happened to Wanda.

The public address speakers crackled, words spewing forth in

Arabic. People reacted, fast, leaping up from the chairs and from the floors, grabbing up suitcases, carpetbags and sheet-wrapped belongings. They ran toward the exits, and the green-clad soliders, at a command from a shrill whistle, spread out, barring every door, guns rigid across their chests.

Shaking his head, Solo retreated to the Air France counter and asked in French what was happening?

The young woman on duty smiled at his halting use of her language, answered in careful English, like something remembered: "The troops are in charge. Zabir borders have been closed, sir, until further notice."

Then she shrugged helplessly. "This is all we know, sir."

Solo thanked her, remembering to walk in that hesitant schoolmaster manner, shoulders slightly forward as if he were writing on an invisible blackboard.

The Arabic chattering suddenly ceased on the public address system. A voice, speaking in English, intoned: "Miss Wanda Mae Kim, please. Miss Wanda Mae Kim, passenger on Air France Flight seven twenty seven, report to the upper lounge at once, please. Miss Kim."

And then the Arabic spewing of commands took over again.

Solo continued his unhurried pace, kept the questioning smile, but moved to the stairs and went up them to the lounge.

At the head of the wide stairs, Solo paused as if out of breath and leaned against the balustrade.

He had to hide his shock at seeing Ambassador Zouida Berikeen standing near the most modern baggage lift. He was not alone. Three or four Zarib civilians, who were obviously Zouida's secretaries and flunkies, stood alertly near him. Behind him were a dozen green-clad soldiers.

Solo exhaled, seeing what the soldiers were guarding. There was a casket, sealed tightly, and upon it were neatly stacked the clothing and effects belonging to Illya Kuryakin.

Near this casket was another, also stacked with feminine apparel and accessories, obviously the belongings of Ann Nelson Wheat, the evangelist who'd been executed as a spy.

Solo felt the muscles tighten in his stomach. Zouida was less than a hundred feet from him. He even saw the ambassador glance in his direction once.

Solo turned and faltered to the coffee bar, where he ordered a demitasse of the strong coffee. It was served with liquid sweetener and goat's milk. He almost gagged on the first sip.

He sweated, wondering if Zouida would recognize him despite his wig, glasses and contact lenses. No one's eyes ever changed, he knew. Perhaps glasses and contact lenses and an excellently constructed gray

wig, plus the fact that Zouida thought him in New York, might deceive the ambassador, but he wouldn't gamble on it.

He winced. Whatever the trouble here in Zarib, it had been enough to cause the immediate and secret recall of the United Nations representative.

He lifted the cup, but didn't take another sip of the coffee.

Wanda came hurrying up the stairs. She almost glanced at him, then turned away.

He shook his head helplessly. He'd wondered where Wanda had disappeared to. Now he knew. She'd gone to the powder room and completely redone her hair and her make-up. While the second-most important man in Zarib waited!

He heard her heels clatter across the tile flooring to where Ambassador Zouida Berikeen awaited her, with his presentation ceremony prepared.

Solo could not hear what they said. It was like watching a stilted tableau. Finally, Wanda bowed to the ambassador, smiled uncertainly at his aides and guards and stepped forward to examine the belongings stacked on Illya's casket.

She turned and said something to Zouida, evidently asking if she would be permitted to open the casket to view the body.

Zouida stepped forward, shaking his head. No, to view the body would not be permitted.

Wanda accepted this, then began to go through the clothing and other belongings spread before her.

Suddenly Wanda cried out.

Napoleon Solo stiffened.

Zouida stepped back, startled. The secretaries straightened and the twelve soldiers came to attention, bayonets glittering at the ready.

Wanda squealed again and waved something in her hand above her head.

Solo set the coffee cup down, afraid he would drop it.

Mouth sagging open, he stared across the lounge toward where Wanda stood, crying out frantically.

Sick, Solo saw her heel around, still waving the square card above her head.

The ambassador put his hand on her arm, but she shook it away. She broke free of the knot of people around the caskets and ran across the room toward him.

Swallowing the bile that gagged him, Solo shook his head at her. But she was like an unruly puppy, frenzied with delight, and nothing was going to stop her. Except a bullet, Solo thought in anguish.

"Solo!" she screamed. "Mister Solo! Look what I've got!"

"Young lady!" Solo said sharply. "I don't know you! I don't want to know you! Get away from me! What are you talking about?"

Everyone on the mezzanine stared at them, Solo saw. He sweated, shaking his head at Wanda.

Her mind could encompass only

her joy. She could not think of anything except the triumph she felt at finding the plastic card among Illya's effects.

"It's his Old-Timer Key Club card!" she cried exultantly.

"Don't know what you're talking about!" Solo protested, retreating.

She followed, shaking the plastic card in front of his face. "The X across it, Mr. Solo! Illya made that. It's our code, don't you remember?"

"I remember!" Solo said under his breath, in raging agony.

"But Mr. Solo! This means Illya is alive! He's alive!"

"Well, you may have fixed that—for all of us!" Solo told her coldly, discarding any attempt to go on with his disguise. Through a red cloud of rage, he saw Zouida and his retinue bearing down on them.

Wanda sagged, finally realizing what she had done. She'd broken silence, betrayed him.

She gasped out in anguish. "But he's alive! I didn't think it mattered after we found he was alive."

He gazed at her. "Finding Illya alive was part of it, Wanda. I could have done that without you. The rest of it was finding out what they wanted, what's behind this plot. But that doesn't matter now."

Wanda sagged against the coffee bar, weeping.

Solo didn't even look at her. He set himself to receive his old friend Zouida in a disguise he had hoped would deceive him.

He wondered what he would find to say that Zouida would accept?

He didn't have to find out, because in a thunder of heavy boots and rattle of weaponry six green-clad coldiers and three black-suited civilians strode off the stairs and surrounded Wanda and Solo before Zouida reached them.

Solo recognized the man in the lead even before the head of Zabir's secret police introduced himself. Kiell was as Zouida had described him, stocky of body, balding, with a high forehead, a ring of thick black curly hair and a walrus moustache.

The thing about Kiell that attracted Solo's especial notice was the thickness of his neck, so that his shirt collar bulged out of shape.

"I am Kiell," the stocky man announced. "Director of Zabir security. Lord protector of His Highness, the King of Lions, the Sultan of the deserts, Sheik Ali Zud of Zarib. In his name, I arrest you as unregistered enemy aliens."

Solo merely nodded, knowing that after Wanda's performance there was nothing he could say. She sagged against him, chewing at her underlip.

"Wait a minute!" From beyond the ring of Kiell's soldier guard, Solo heard Zouida calling. "Kiell, let me talk to you!"

Kiell straightened. His voice lashed out. "Piebr! Frun!" The two black-suited secret police snapped to attention, drawing guns from

shoulder holsters. The two detectives were much younger than Kiell —in their early twenties, slender, dark.

Piebr and Frun pushed back, making a double line of the soldiers, three on each side. The twelve casket guards stopped, standing at attention when Kiell barked commands at them in Arabic.

Piebr and Frun stood with handguns against their chests, staring straight ahead, making a path from Ambassador Zouida in to where Kiell waited, unbending.

Frowning, Zouida walked slowly, staring at Kiell and shaking his head. When he reached the place where the two younger detectives stood, Zouida paused, looking at one of them in anguish. He whispered, "Piebr—"

The young detective merely straightened his shoulders, stood more rigidly, staring across the top of the older man's head.

Zouida exhaled audibly, his body sagging.

Kiell spoke in English, his lips oddly immobile, as if he hated the words he was forced to speak. "If you would discuss your betrayal of our lord the king, speak to me! Piebr has nothing to say to a traitor!"

"Traitor?" Zouida quivered visibly. He shook his head, tears brimming his anguished eyes. "I am no traitor. My whole soul belongs to my king and my country."

"Your lies won't do you any good now, old goat," Kiell said between taut lips.

Zouida stared at Kiell for a long time, then finally shrugged, as if admitting to himself that there was no realism in appealing for mercy from Kiell. It was like asking water from the desert sands.

He drew a deep breath and turned to face Solo.

"I am sorry, my old friend," he said. "I am sorry about all of this. But I can only say to you, I have been double-crossed, too."

"Enough!" Kiell said in cold rage. He drew a gun from his shoulder holster, thrust it close to Zouida's solar plexus and pressed the trigger.

The report of the handgun was muffled by Zouida's clothing and his body. The ambassador was driven backward by the impact of the bullet. He staggered, toppled against Piebr. The young detective

chewed on his mouth, staring straight ahead.

Slowly Zouida crumpled to the floor at the feet of Piebr and the green-clad soldiers. He whispered. "May Allah—have mercy on my poor—poor country."

He sagged heavily then, a rattle working up through his throat, and he was dead.

Kiell gave the dead man the merest glance. He turned the gun on Wanda and Solo. Wanda cried out involuntarily.

Kiell spoke coldly. "If the two of you do not wish to join that traitor, you will come quietly."

Kiell jerked his head. The six soldiers moved in prodding Wanda and Solo toward the stairs.

Kiell strode to the center of the mezzanine. He gestured toward the slain ambassador.

"A traitor to our country has been slain!" he shouted. "Slain in the name of King Zud! Long live Zud!"

"Long live Zud!" the soldiers shouted in reply. The guards on the floor below took up the cry and it rattled against the high-domed ceiling. "Long live Zud!"

TWO

ILLYA KURYAKIN worked swiftly, plaiting a yard-long rope. The strips of cloth he used came from the lower hem of the filthy burnoose he wore. All other clothing had been stripped away from him. He was barefooted; he no longer had even a watch.

He supposed time wasn't too urgent here in the dungeon under Sheik Zud's castle. Still, he hoped by now that Solo had been sent to collect his belongings. Zud had told him that Solo had been sent for. What Zud didn't know was about the X mark on the face of the Key Club card, the code which said to an alert agent like Solo, *I'm alive. Danger. Proceed with caution.*

Zud had been throwing nothing but curves at him since his arrival in Zarib a month ago. He had come here as a technical adviser to Zud's spy system.

And he'd ended up here in this dank cell.

Illya's blue eyes darkened. He ran his hand through his Slavic corn-colored hair.

He straightened, hearing sporadic gunfire from the streets outside the castle. Zud had plenty of woes at home. What was this deal of holding him and trying to lure Solo into the same trap?

The guard drew his bayonet across the bars. Illya looked up, dropping the rope into his lap. The guard, about Illya's age, wore a sweated green uniform, hat back on his head. He'd spent two years at England's Sandhurst, but now was in bad with Zud and detailed to guard the political prisoners.

"Aly David," Illya said, "what time do you go off duty?"

The guard laughed. "Why? Do

you want to go out on the town with me?"

Illya forced a smile, but thought coldly that Aly David would be astonished to learn he meant to escape. He would use this cloth rope he was plaiting as a garrotte. He would be forced to strangle a guard in order to get out of this cell. He'd grown fond of Aly David; there were many of the others he'd use the garrotte upon without reluctance. Brutal, sadistic animals they had proved to be.

Illya said, "I wouldn't go out on the town in these rags." He looked down at the ill-fitted burnoose. "The last prisoner who wore this thing was not only bigger than I am, he had lice."

Aly David laughed. "The lice give you something to take your mind off your troubles. I've grown quite fond of mine."

"*W*hy don't you break out of this country? You're as much its prisoner as I am."

"Except that it is my country. And I love it," Aly David said. "Relax. They won't be using gun butts on you for another four hours. I am your guard until after recall from worship." He laughed. "And you'd better remember to sleep with your feet some other direction than toward the east—and Allah. Next time they might kill you for that slight indiscretion."

Illya exhaled and relaxed against the wall, resigned to waiting until after prayers to attempt his escape. He didn't want to have to use this garrotte on Aly David—unless he had to.

THREE

A ROLLS ROYCE was parked, engine idling, outside the airport terminal. A stolid-faced chauffeur stood at attention with both front and rear curb side doors held open.

Wanda and Solo marched out at the head of the convoy of Kiell, two detectives and six armed soldiers.

The soldiers double-timed out, lining up at front and rear of the Rolls Royce, guns held across their chests, ready, facing the darkness.

Solo saw a sign which read, "OMAR, 45 kilos." Beyond he saw small buildings, vague lights, and then what appeared to be eternal wasteland, rugged and lifeless, cruel looking even in the softening dark.

Kiell ordered Wanda into the front seat. Then he said to Solo. "One moment, Mr. Solo. I am sick looking at this disguise."

Solo scowled, thinking that Kiell had gotten sick of it quickly, unless he'd seen pictures of the real Solo somewhere.

Solo paused beside the car. Kiell caught the wig, jerked it from Solo's head, along with the rimless glasses. He threw them to the cement at his feet.

"In the back," he said. "Let's move!"

Solo sat in the back seat between Piebr and Frun. Frun made

a slight whistling noise between his teeth, but Piebr stared straight ahead, lost in thought. Both held guns ready in their lap.

In the front seat Wanda sat disconsolately between Kiell and the chauffeur.

The chauffeur drove the car out to the wide four-laned highway, anachronistically modern, hewn from this ancient earth. He held the speedometer at sixty. Nobody spoke.

Solo stared at the back of Keill's head, at the way his shirt collar bulged around his neck. It was strange, as if the man had a tube of flesh growing like a welt.

Solo's heart slugged faster as he stared at that shirt collar. He remembered how he had reacted when Kiell spoke of his own disguise, puzzled.

He held his breath, gazing at that bulging collar. Suppose that bulge was not caused by flesh, but by the rolled ends of a plastic mask?

He felt the sweat break out at his hair line, across his forehead. If that question weren't far-out enough, how about another one? Suppose that was not really Kiell? Suppose it was a man wearing a plasitc mask, impersonating Zabir's chief of secret police?

Solo loosened the button of his jacket. Piebr and Frun reacted like robots, placing guns at his temples.

Kiell turned uncomfortably, laughed between taut lips. "Don't think you can get away with anything, Mr. Solo. My men are trained to kill."

"I know," Solo said. "But once they're trained to kill, they never make good pets again, do they?"

Thick silence settled in the car again. Solo went on sweating. They whipped past a sign reading "OMAR 35 kilometers." Time was running out. He could not quite believe an impostor could fool the country's ambassador, or these two trained officers.

But could they not be in on the plot? But if they were impostors, would Zouida have recognized them? He'd called one of them by name. Still, he could have been fooled by Kiell, who hurled charges of highest treason at him. And Kiell had killed him on the spot. No trial, no extenuating circumstances, no second chance—nothing.

Solo pushed his hand in his jacket pocket. Both Piebr and Frun reacted. Again gun barrels pressed at Solo's temples. He withdrew a small plastic bag of bright candy wafers.

The police relaxed.

Kiell snarled at him, "Sit still, or die now!"

Solo offered the wafers to Piebr and Frun. They refused, contempt showing in their faces that he'd think them so stupid. He shrugged and plopped two in his mouth.

When he leaned forward to the front seat, Piebr and Frun leaned with him. He offered candy to Kiell,

who told him to sit back. The chauffeur only shook his head.

Solo said, "Have a couple wafers, Wanda. It'll take your mind off your woes."

She shook her head refusing. His sharply spoken, "Wanda! Candy!" made her sit up, nodding.

Hand trembling, she took two wafers, tossed them in her mouth.

Solo relaxed, crushed the plastic bag in his fist, dropped it on the floor. He sat back, fingering his tie.

At the moment he felt both Frun and Piebr relax on each side of him, he jerked off his tie clasp and tossed it over into the front seat.

Both Piebr and Frun lunged at him, guns up. He caught them; using their own momentum, he smashed their heads together.

Kiell turned, bringing his own gun up as the explosion in the front of the car stopped him, stunned by shock.

The gas spread instantaneously, carried on the currents of air conditioning. The windows fogged with it. Everything was blotted out. Kiell gagged, gulping for breath. The chauffeur lost control of the wheel.

The big car hurtled to the right off the highway, going down the rough shoulders, and bounding crazily up the far incline before it finally stalled.

Solo was already opening the rear door of the car.

Gasping for breath, but unaffected by the nerve gas that had overcome the others, Wanda twisted around on the front seat.

Solo grabbed her under the arms, dragged her over the seat and out of the rear door. Once they were outside the car, he shoved her away from him.

She sprawled face down in the sand.

Solo didn't even glance her way. He dragged Piebr and Frun from the back seat, then pulled the driver and Kiell from the front, leaving the doors wide so the car could air out.

Wanda pulled herself to her feet, watching him, her mouth quivering.

Solo glanced at her.

"Get their guns," he ordered. "All their guns. Quick. And don't forget the chauffeur!"

He took a small needle from the inner lapel of his jacket and a plastic vial from his pocket. He inserted the needle into the vial until the liquid dripped from it. Then he scratched into the vein near the base of Kiell's throat.

He tossed the vial and needle from him then and concentrated on the tight-fitting mask. He rolled it carefully up across the face and head of the unconscious man.

When he had peeled the mask away, he stared down into the face of Ordwell Slybrough, the practical joker from the plane.

"Who do you think he really is?" Wanda said breathlessly. "I know he isn't a car salesman."

"He's a THRUSH agent. And Zouida's poor country has a lot more woes than even poor Zouida suspected."

Solo chose the best of the guns Wanda had collected. He pushed it under his belt. Then he stashed the others in the glove compartment on the Rolls dash.

Wanda watched him silently, a look of awe firing her black eyes.

He took all identification papers from the double agent's pockets. Ordwell had regained consciousness, but he could neither move nor speak.

He stared at Napoleon Solo, hatred burning in his eyes.

"Have a cigar, old pal," Solo said and shoved one between the double agent's lips. It hung there. "Don't worry, the injection I gave you will have no side effects. It'll just keep you quiet, and your voice turned off for a few hours."

Solo placed the papers he'd carried for Armistead Finch into Ordwell's pockets. Then with slow, painstaking care and the use of a small mirror he worked the plastic mask down over his own head. He placed the Kiell identification papers in his jacket pocket.

Ordwell tried to speak, failed, shadows swirling deep in his eyes.

Wanda stared at Solo in the mask, lips parted.

Solo pulled the three men into the rear of the car, tossed Ordwell in upon them. He closed the doors, reversed the Rolls to the highway.

"Get in under the wheel," Solo told Wanda. "And keep driving, no matter what happens. Follow orders this time."

"I'm so sorry about the candy. I realize now you were innoculating me against the effects of the gas."

"I was a fool," Solo said. "I'll hate myself for it."

"You'll never regret it," Wanda said. "I'm going to be a good agent for you."

"You should live so long." Solo sat turned on the front seat, gun in hand resting on the back, fixed on the three men in the back of the car.

"All right," he snapped at Wanda. "Saddle up! Move out!"

Her voice was small, panic-stricken. "Please, boss. There is just one little thing."

Solo managed to refrain from swearing. "Yes. What is it?"

"Please, boss. How do you shift the gears on a car like this?"

FOUR

THE GROTESQUE yellow fingers flicking out from a single large candle fought feebly against the dark of the prison cell.

Illya Kuryakin stood up, testing the plaited rope by jerking it sharply between his fists. It wouldn't snub down an elephant, but it would do.

He listened. The firing had ceased in the streets during the prayer hour. Afterwards, they

fought again, almost to the palace gates.

He sat in the darkness, waited for the end of prayer time, for the changing of the guards.

Now, the moment of truth.

He rolled up his straw mattress to resemble a human body and placed it in the darkest corner of the cell. He grinned, knowing the guard could not bring his lantern inside a night cell. He needed to keep both arms free to protect himself.

When the mattress was lined up to suit him, he inched across the cell to the opposite cave-dark corner. From here, he uttered a cry, pleased that it sounded as if it came from the straw mattress!

He sighed in relief because ventriloquism was an art that demanded faithful practice, and he admitted he'd grown rusty.

He wound the ropes over each hand, leaving a loop between. Then, crouched there, he moaned again, and again, until at last a guard came grumbling to the cell bars.

"What's the matter in there?"

"I'm sick," Illya whined, his voice coming from the pile of straw.

"You'll be sick, you don't stop that whining."

"I think I'm dying!"

The guard hesitated. "You better not die. Come here to the bars—let me look at you."

"I can't! I'm too ill."

"Listen to me! You come here. Sheik Zud ordered us not to kill you. But don't push me too far."

"If you don't kill me, you can't keep me here," Illya said in that weak voice.

"I can make you wish you were dead," the guard told him.

Illya's voice lowered. "Yes. There's always that. Isn't there?"

"You think about that, and you keep quiet in there."

"Zud will have your head when he finds I died while you were on guard."

There was a long silence. Finally Illya Kuryakin heard the key thrust into the iron lock, the door whine on its hinges as it was opened.

Illya held his breath, crouching in the corner, watching.

The guard moved cautiously across the dark cell. A wan splinter of light lay on the floor in a line from the high, inset window.

The guard moved across the spray of moonlight, gun upraised. "Where are you?"

"Here. I'm so sick." Illya tossed his voice into the rolled straw mattress.

"Get up. Let me look at you."

"I can't. I think my appendix has ruptured."

Suddenly he heard the guard cry out, and he went tense.

"Infidel!" the guard shouted. "Again you sleep with your infidel feet toward Allah!"

He lifted the gun and brought it butt down on the straw mattress.

Illya lunged upward, flinging himself across the darkness.

At that instant, the guard realized he'd been fooled. He straightened, trying to turn.

He was too late. The garrotte was clamped about his throat, and Illya thrust his fists past each other with all his strength, pulling it tight.

The gun clattered to the stone floor. The guard followed it, like a toppling tree. He sank to his knees and fell over to his side.

Illya waited no longer. He grabbed up the gun, ran through the door. He closed the cell, locking it. He threw the keys into an empty cell, ran.

He almost ran into another guard at the first turn of the cell block.

The heavy tread of the soldier warned him.

Very slowly, barefooted, Illya inched his way to the corner, peered around it.

The prisoners in the cell block shouted, aware that one of them had broken loose.

Illya saw the guard come alert, shift his gun ready. He pressed back against the wall.

As the guard came racing around the corner, Illya stuck out the butt of his gun. The soldier tripped on it and went sprawling forward on his face.

His gun clattered far out of his reach ahead of him. He shook himself and came up on his knees, trying to turn around.

"I wish I didn't hate violence so," Illya said, clobbering him with his gun butt.

The prisoners in the cells were hysterical now. They ran to the bars, chanting, hooting, yelling, scraping tin cups on the iron bars.

In the distance Illya Kuryakin heard the booted guard detail alerted, running toward the cell-block.

He glanced around at the wailing prisoners.

"Thanks a whole bunch, fellows," he said in sarcasm.

He stood in the middle of the corridor, gazing around helplessly.

A voice shouted at him from a cell. "Mister! Through that narrow passage. It leads to the kitchen, the garbage. There is only one guard there. Hurry. And Allah go with you!"

Illya didn't waste time in thanks. As the first wave of the guard detail clattered off the wide stone steps and into the corridor, he slipped into the dark passage.

He ran along it. The inmate had not lied about the garbage at least. The sick-sweet smell of it almost suffocated him.

He saw the door at the top of a small stairs. He raced up it.

He heard boots behind him in the darkness. The opening door would silhouette him in light. Yet he could not hurry. He had to know where that guard was out there.

Just slitting the door, Illya peered out. A rifle was fired from behind him. The bullet splintered the door inches from his head. This made the decision for him. He thrust the door wide and lunged through it.

The guard on duty was entangled with a scullery maid in the deepest shadows.

He wheeled around, grabbing for his gun. Illya swung the barrel of his gun, stunning the soldier. The maid screamed, her mouth wide. And screamed again until the garden rang with her screaming.

Illya gazed around in panic. There was the kitchen garden and beyond it a gate in the four-foot wall. The gate stood open. Beyond

it lay freedom. All he had to do was make it across that garden.

The maid screamed louder, hysterical. He heard the heavy-booted soldiers approaching in the narrow passage. Lights flared on in the lower windows of the palace. Suddenly, police dogs yowled nearby, and a siren screeched frantically from a minaret.

Illya sprinted across the garden. The soldiers had reached the door and thrust it open, but he had made the gate. He grabbed the heavy wooden gate and swung it closed behind him. It slammed into place, locking.

Illya whirled around, ready to run.

He almost plowed into a soldier, standing ready, gun fixed on him, bayonet gleaming in the darkness.

Illya stopped instantly. He straightened, feeling rage and frustration that he'd failed after all this.

"Hold!" the soldier ordered.

Illya's heart leaped. He recognized the voice. It was Aly David, off-duty, on his way to the barracks.

"Aly David!" he said. "Don't shoot, it's me! Illya Kuryakin. We're friends. I waited, so you wouldn't have to be hurt when I broke out. Let me go! It's me, Aly David. Illya!"

"I know who it is," Aly David said. "You're a fine fellow, and I like you. My country hasn't treated me fairly, and you have. Still it is my country. And you are my prisoner. If you do not drop that gun and return quietly to your cell, I'll have to kill you."

* * *

THE HIGHWAY was lonely, empty, untraveled.

Solo, watching the headlamps bore holes in the desert darkness, wondered how many dozen automobiles in the entire country of Zabir used this sleek modern highway?

He held the gun ready, fixed on his prisoners stacked in the tonneau of the big car. He saw one of the younger detectives stir.

He glanced at a sign post: "OMAR 25 kilometers."

He spoke to Wanda, who clutched the wheel with both hands, her whole body tense in concentration. "This is far enough. Stop here."

Wanda removed her foot from the accelerator, allowing the Rolls to glide to a stop on the rocky highway shoulder.

Solo told her, "You keep your mouth shut. No matter what happens."

Wanda drew a deep breath. "You can trust me, boss, from now on. I'll die before I betray you."

"Promises. Promises," Solo said, getting out of the car. He opened the rear door. First, he propped the stocky Ordwell up on the back seat, secured with handcuffs he found among the detective's gear.

"You won't need these," he said

amiably to the double agent, "but it will look better."

He helped the struggling Piebr from the car. The young detective staggered, drawing his hand across his eyes. His dark face was gray from the lingering effects of the gas.

"What happened?" he asked, staring into the plastic mask, and evidently accepting Solo as his superior.

Solo jerked his Kiell-appearing head toward the handcuffed double agent. "This man tried to kill us all with a small nerve-gas bomb. I managed to overcome him."

Piebr recovered slowly, his wits sharpening. He scowled, staring at Ordwell's ruddy face. "But he's not the same man at all!"

"Of course not!" Solo snapped. "After I had overpowered him, I realized something was wrong. This man was wearing a plastic mask."

He heard Wanda's sharp intake of breath, but didn't glance her way.

"When I ripped the mask away," Solo said, "I finally got down to his real face—though it's nothing to boast about, eh?"

Piebr grinned weakly. "You are very clever, Chief."

"That's why I am your superior," Solo said in an arrogant tone. "Help your partner to his feet, and the driver. Get them out in the fresh air. Everything is under control now, and we'll be able to deliver this infidel Napoleon Solo—" he inclined his masked head toward Ordwell—"to the King of the Lions."

"Zud will be eternally indebted, Chief," Piebr said. He aided the two men from the car.

"Exactly," Solo said with just the correct inflection of arrogance. "Perhaps now he will listen to our suggestions for his own safety."

"I hope so, Brilliant One," Piebr said humbly.

The masked Solo glanced toward Wanda and said directly toward her, "Too bad our enemies do not train their subordinates to have such loyalty to their superiors."

He saw Wanda wince.

When Frun and the driver had been sufficiently revived by the night air, Solo said in a sharp tone: "Now, let's waste no more time." He faced the driver. "Get us to the palce at once."

"Yes, sire." The driver bowed low.

Solo looked at Frun and Piebr. "Guard this young woman. Keep her alive. I'll want to question her. Of course she's working with Napoleon Solo there."

Wanda's mouth sagged open.

Pebr spoke hesitantly. "Sire, our guns. They're gone."

"Of course they are," Solo said, voice rasping. "I wanted to demonstrate to you what can happen to you if you let down your vigil for one moment." He got the guns from the glove compartment, returned them to the three men.

Wanda's gasp was audible now,

and when he looked at her, her astonished mouth gaped wide.

"And you, close your mouth, young woman!" he ordered. "Flies are very bad in this country."

ACT III
INCIDENT OF THE CATALYTIC AGENT

THE ROLLS ROYCE droned soothingly upon the slick highway, racing in the desert night. The closer they came to the capital City of Omar, the tighter Napoleon Solo found himself wound. On the front seat between him and the driver, Wanda was fighting increasing hysteria. He felt her leg pressed savagely against his, as if she hoped some of his courage might rub off on her.

In the dune-scalloped distance ahead, they saw the saffron glow of Omar's lights.

Suddenly, in an oasis as lush as a rainforest, the tall spires and minarets of the sheik's palace loomed against the star-laced heavens.

The driver dimmed his lights twice, and the wrought-iron gates, fifteen feet tall in a thick blockstone wall, swung back. The driver raced through without slowing. As they sped along the curving drive to the brilliantly illuminated chateau, Solo saw lines of green-garbed soldiers on guard, bayonets fixed.

Getting in was easy, he thought. The trick was in getting out.

Before the driver braked the Rolls before the wide, curving, forty marble steps leading upward to the columned portico at the palace entrance, a battalion of bowing servants had raced out. They spread themselves, fanlike down the steps, awaiting any commands of the illustrious arrivals.

Solo had to remind himself that all this display of humility was in his honor—as Kiell, head of Zabir's security, protector of Zud.

A servant raced forward, opening Solo's door first and prostrating himself on the marble as Solo stepped from the car.

Solo gave the servant no more than a glance; without even looking back, strode up the steps.

He wasn't sure where he was going, but he knew that asking questions now would be fatal.

He saw a head-servant, standing illumined in jewel-like lights from the opened doors at the head of the steps. The man stood ramrod straight until Solo came off the top step. Then the servant sank to his knees and kissed the ground at his feet.

From his prone position the servant intoned in portentous voice, "Sheik Zud requests that you meet with him and his ministers in the council room, Master."

Solo nodded, hearing Wanda and the others coming up the marble steps behind him.

He turned and glanced at them. Frun and the driver supported the handcuffed Ordwell between them. Piebr followed, his hand on Wanda's elbow.

Wanda looked ready to crumple.

Solo waited until his subordinates and prisoners were grouped behind him. Then he said, "We will all go to the council room, where we will deliver these infidel traitors to our great Zud."

He spoke to the servant: "Lead us to the council room."

Solo strode through the jewel-decked doors in the wake of the head-servant. He walked alone through the high portals of silver into a spacious, incredible lobby, twice again as large as the gleaming concourse in the elegant new air terminal at Kurbot. He could almost hear the soft echoing of his own bated breathing in this high-domed hall.

Solo managed to walk with his head straight, restraining his wish to stare in amazement at silk tapestries, deep damasks, and precious stone inlays. The floor glittered in its golden pattern of bright mosaics. Each inch of the place shone with polish, reflecting the myriad of lights, although no light fixtures were visible; everything was done indirectly or by reflection.

The servant preceded Solo up a staircase whose balustrade glittered with opulent jewelry.

At the head of these stairs, five wide corridors led outward into the wings of the palace. The servant chose his course and Solo followed him.

The long corridor was covered by a domed ceiling and its open places boasted silver-barred banisters.

The laughter of children swept up to Solo. He glanced across the banister into a suite where innumerable children played, laughing.

He decided even the head of the secret police would be permitted a look. He walked to the balustrade and stared down at King Zud's offspring. He had never seen happier children. They were completely unaware of the strife outside the palace walls.

He turned, waving his hand. The head-servant moved out again. They walked for some moments, passed closed doors, before they came out again to an opening. A quick glance told him this was the court of the wives. He did not pause, because he reckoned instinctively that not even Zud's protector would be permitted to look down on Zud's wives taking their ease.

The chatter of the women followed him. He recalled that Zouida

had insisted that Zud's wives—all of them his former slaves—were happy and contented and worshiped their shared husband.

The servant led them through another corridor, which ended finally at a thick cedar door with iron trim. The servant touched a bell and instantly servants inside the council room swung the door open for them.

Napoleon Solo strode in. He was less bold than he appeared.

He slowed involuntarily, seeing a conference room fifty feet across and eighty feet long. A gleaming table surrounded by high-backed leather chairs dominated the place. Except for the jewel-crusted throne at the head of the conference table, the chamber might have been the inner sanctum of some industrial complex.

He sighed, seeing that the throne was empty. At least Zud was not yet here. Along each side of the table were twelve dark men, the sheik's ministers. Solo saw an empty chair at the right of the throne; instinctively he knew this was the seat of the recently slained Zouida Berikeen.

Directly across from the empty chair was another waiitng place and Solo went around to it without hesitation. The ministers bowed to him, and he saw he'd passed another test.

He spoke to Piebr. "The driver will go with the servants. You, Piebr and Frun, will guard my prisoners. Put them on their knees against the wall there for our king's inspection. On their knees. And don't let them speak while Sheik Zud is in this room. They must not speak, no matter what happens."

Piebr nodded, proud to be associated with the protector of Zud. "As you order, Master."

Solo dropped into his chair, as if he owned at least an interest in the corporation. He did not even bother to glance to see how his orders were being executed.

He did, after he was seated, glance once toward Wanda. She watched him, mouth parted, half in awe, half in terror for them both. Her look expressed precisely his own inner panic, he thought wryly.

Suddenly ceiling-high golden doors beyond the throne were opened and Sheik Zud strode through.

The twelve ministers leaped to their feet and then prostrated their heads on the table.

Solo followed their example, but could not resist turning his head slightly.

Sheik Zud came from a suite even more brilliantly illuminated than this council chamber. Ahead of him, on the waves of air conditioning came smells of spices, perfumes, rich aroma of foods and fine new linens. And out of it Zud sprang, with the graceful stride of a beast.

A beast!

When the huge man—he was

some inches over six feet tall, with shoulders that blotted out the throne behind him, a chest like a hogshead bursting with wine—had reached the throne and sat down, he pounded the side of his fist on the table and the ministers were permitted to sit up, bow each in turn, and then sit back.

Solo was thankful for the skin-fitting mask he wore to hide his emotions at the first sight of the man.

Zud's head was large, like a lion's head. Solo knew that in its terminal stages the ancient scourge of the East, leprosy, gave its victims the lion-face.

But Zud's was a matter of birth, not disease. He had the look of a lion. His graying hair was like a wine-gold mane that grew down to his shoulders, turned up at the ends, making his head seem more magnificent than ever.

His eyes, under sprouting brows, were relentless, black and fiery, catching all the lights in the room.

He swung his arms in his silken robes, and the gale rustled papers at the far end of the room.

Napoleon Solo felt awed despite himself.

"Well, Kiell! Here you are finally!" The chandeliers shivered when Zud roared.

Solo bowed Kiell's plastic-mask face, his forehead touching the table.

"Don't pretend such humility!" Zud roared. "You're not humble. I'd fear your arrogance if I feared anything on this earth. Such arrogance! You slew the man closest to my heart in the air terminal at Kurbot! My own conscience, my own dear friend—Zouida Berikeen! How then can I trust you, Kiell! If you would cut out my heart, would you not put a bullet in my back if I turned it on you?"

Solo sat for an instant, stunned by Zud's stupendous rage. He felt as Zud did about the dead ambassador. If there was a man in Zarib he'd have staked his life could have been trusted, it was little Zouida. And here he was, wearing the face of the man who had slain him in cold blood.

He saw now why Ordwell, posing as Kiell, had had to accuse Zouida of treason and kill him on the spot. Ordwell's impersonation could not have succeeded under Zouida's close scrutiny.

He drew a deep breath, feeling the sweat trying to squeeze between his skin and the tight-fitting mask. How could he justify a murder he felt in his own heart was tragic and inexcusable? He had to if he wanted to stay alive.

"Speak up!" Zud roared. "Or would you have me lop off your head?"

Solo recalled everything Zouida had said of the real Kiell—a brave, arrogant man, well-hated, but deeply respected—a man who would unhesitatingly lay down his life for his ruler.

"Oh, Zud, if you wish to take my life, you have merely to order my head upon the block!" Solo said, sweating. "If ever I betrayed you, even in my most uncontrolled dreams, I then would order my own life forfeit—"

"Yes! Yes! We know all this!" Zud shouted him down. "Why else do you think you have lived this long? I'm giving you more than you gave Zouida! A chance to be heard."

"Then hear me, O mighty Sultan! Zouida was a weak man, and not working in our best interests."

"You're saying Zouida was a traitor?" Zud leaped to his full height, and Solo half expected to see lightning bolts flare from his fists. "You'll have to do better than this, Kiell!"

"To my best knowledge, Zouida opposed what my king Zud feels is the best course for our nation."

"You mean that? You mean that Zouida opposed our joining forces with the international THRUSH organization?"

"I mean just that. He would have fought us. Perhaps I was rash. But I thought only of the safety of my ruler."

"Incredible. Incredible," Zud whispered.

"I had proof," Solo persisted.

Slowly, the giant sank to his throne. He put his head back and glared at the jeweled ceiling, glared through it toward Allah, himself. His lion's eyes filled with tears. For a long time he remained like that.

Nobody spoke.

Finally, Zud drew his arm across his lion's face and sat up. He moved his gaze across his ministers. He raged at them: "We will follow my plans. Do you understand? If there is another who opposes me, even in his heart—if he would save his own life, let him speak now, and I will swear to him safe conduct to our borders and a life of exile."

He waited, but nobody moved. Some even appeared to have suspended their breathing.

Zud waved his arm again. He stared at Ordwell and Wanda on their knees against the wall, under the guard of the two secret police officers. "Who are these people, Kiell? Did you bring me the man we must have to satisfy THRUSH's demands on us?"

"Napoleon Solo?" Solo said. "That is Solo." He jerked his head toward Ordwell.

"Have you nothing to say, Solo?" Zud raged.

Solo, as Kiell, spoke mildly. "He cannot at this moment say anything, O King of Lions. I gave him a nerve-paralyzing injection. It will wear off, but it makes him easier to handle."

Zud nodded. "How about the pretty little girl? Can she speak?"

"She can speak, if she has the courage to do it," Solo said.

Zud shouted. "Come here, girl!"

Solo saw Wanda's trembling half across the room. Piebr prodded her

and she stood up, came reluctantly forward and stood beside the throne.

"On your knees, female!" Zud shouted.

"Bow to his mighty person!" Solo raged at Wanda.

She went down on her knees, her black eyes round and stricken with terror.

Zud stared down at her. "Beautiful. Like a rare, exotic orchid from the Orient. What a brilliant addition to my present array of loveliness." He shouted suddenly. "You'd hate that, wouldn't you, girl? Because I'm so ugly. Go on. Say it. My own mother thought me ugly. She taunted me because of my ugliness. From the day when I walked from the cradle, I heard her taunts and her jeering.

"She had three handsome sons—and me, the beast! That's what she called her own son. The beast. She was all the loveliness of paradise on this earth. I wanted just one moment of her love, and she called me her ugly little beast. Well, perhaps I was her ugliest, but I became the greatest. Not even she can deny this!"

"No one of this earth can deny your greatness, O Ruler!" cried the twelve ministers in unison and Solo joined them, belatedly.

He frowned, because he found himself admiring Zud. The goodness inside the Gargantuan man showed through his eyes. He shook his head. He had a job to do. If Zud was his enemy, he would have to fight him, no matter his secret feelings.

Zud said to Wanda, "I ought to make you my slave. I would teach you to accept me in humility. And when I had taught you that, I could force you to marry me—as I have all my wives. But no, I can see the terror in your face, and I am too tired to care any more. Too much to do!" He clapped his hands. "We have the other prisoner THRUSH required. Kuryakin is in custody still. Put these two with him!"

Solo bowed, and then stood up. He hesitated because he did not know where to go from here. He sweated. The chief of security would know where a political enemy was imprisoned. He couldn't even ask.

Suddenly at his side, Piebr spoke. "This way, Master. Frun and I will go ahead of you."

"Bless you," Solo said under his breath, and then they retreated from the chamber, bowing.

But even when he was in the splendid corridor, following Piebr along it, he still shivered slightly because he had seen in the last moments, a strange doubting light, dazzlingly bright, in Zud's black eyes.

TWO

ILLYA KURYAKIN sprawled in the sumptuous softness of pillows stuffed with flamingo down. He

wore linen robes and fed himself from bowls heaped with grapes, chunks of lamb, onion, peppers, roasted tomatoes, hunks of chicken breast.

He sat up in the high-ceilinged, lavishly appointed room, when suddenly the door opened and Solo entered, followed by Ordwell and Wanda under the guard of Piebr and Frun.

They closed the door and the two secret police stood beside it, guns drawn.

Illya waved his arm. "If you've come to take me out of all this opulence, forget it! I'm just learning how to live."

Wanda cried out, "Oh, Illya!"

She ran to him and hurled herself into his arms. She cried, "Illya! Are you all right?"

"I am now!" he said. "It hasn't always been like this. I might have known they were just dolling me up because we were having guests. On the other hand, I don't care why, just so long as it goes on like this."

Wanda said, her voice pitched warningly, "That's poor *Napoleon Solo* there—" She gestured toward Ordwell, paralyzed, but conscious of all that was going on.

Solo strode forward in his Kiell mask, raging. "Shut up, girl! How many times have I ordered that you say nothing! Nothing! No matter what happens?"

Wanda gasped, realizing she had spoken again when silence was indicated. She pressed herself close to Illya

Illya smiled, pleased. "Things are getting better all the time. Maybe I'll start my own harem here."

Wanda subsided, still clinging to him. She watched him and Solo in the Kiell mask, frightened.

Solo walked close He held out the key club card with the code X on it. He said, "I believe this is yours. Your clumsy attempt to reveal a secret to your fellow agents."

Wanda's eyes widened as she saw how quickly Illya understood everything. She saw in his face that it was as if he and the masked Solo had spent three hours in urgent exchange of information.

He said, shrugging, "You won't get anything out of me, Kiell. Or my friend Solo there."

Wanda exhaled. It was as if she was breathing for the first time since she had entered this room.

"Where have they moved the woman evangelist?" Solo asked.

"I don't know anything about her, Kiell," Illya said. "I've been telling you that."

"You worked with her when she

first arrived in Zabir!" Solo shouted at him.

"You're wrong! How many times do I to tell you fellows I'm here only because your king invited me? I don't know anything about Ann Nelson Wheat. But I'll tell you what I think, Kiell."

"Do that, infidel," Solo said.

"I don't think Ann Nelson Wheat was spying on you people any more than I was. I think you arrested her along with me so you could make it look good to the world—and you want to know what else I think?"

"Yes, if you dare speak!"

"What have I got to lose?" Illya said, shrugging. "I think this whole bit, arresting the evangelist and me, was just to cover up a game of footsie you people are playing with THRUSH."

"That's enough out of you!" Solo shouted.

"Sure." Illya sank back into the pillows. He picked up a roasted chicken breast, took a deep bite, chewing pleasurably. "Just one thing I ask of you. If I'm dreaming, don't wake me up."

"I want information about Ann Nelson Wheat!" Solo raged.

Illya gestured upward toward him. "Then I suggest you talk to Sheik Zud."

Piebr sprang across the room, brandishing a pistol toward Illya.

Illya said, "If you shoot me, friend, be sure you hit me and not this chicken. It's too good to waste."

Piebr snarled at him. But Solo waved the detective back to the door. "It's all right, Piebr. I can handle the infidel."

"He has no right to speak to you in such a tone, Master."

Illya took another bite of chicken. "I was only being friendly. After all, it's a good suggestion. You want to know what happened to Ann Nelson Wheat, Kiell, ask your king. After all, we're his prisoners here; you're not. The head of his security police ought to be able to arrange a private audience with the sultan, it seems to me."

* * *

WHEN THE servants parted the silk curtains at the innermost chambers of the sheik, Solo walked in and bowed low, going down to his knee, hoping this was the correct genuflection expected of a minister-level subject of Zud.

He saw there were two women with Zud. One sat on a recently installed throne that was slightly higher than Zud's. The other woman sat at the ruler's massive feet.

Zud spoke at Solo sharply. "Off your knee. I warned you about this false show of humility. You want me to start mistrusting you? I should never have permitted your going to Harvard for your education. You came back thinking you were just slightly better than any one except Allah himself. I should have sent you to West Point—there they would have taught you to respect your superiors. Off your knee, unless you make obeisance to our

most exalted lady, Queen Soraya Haidar of Xanra."

"I pledge my life to both of you," Solo said hesitantly.

Zud threw his head back laughing. "You'd have a difficult time fulfilling such obligation, eh, Soraya? Eh? If he tried to give his life for both of us—since we are in enemy camps, eh?"

"We do not need to be, Zud," Soraya said. Solo saw she was of a loveliness that was breathtaking, a dark and splendid beauty. "We could do much together, you and I."

Zud raged. "Only I am too ugly for you, eh?"

"Only you have ever suggested such a false thing, Your Highness," Soraya said.

"Oh, I know!" Zud shouted. "You're too polite to laugh in my face as my mother did. How do you hold your laughter until you get back among your own ladies-in-waiting?"

"There is no laughter in my heart, except that I would share with you, O Mighty King, if you would let me."

Solo saw the pain in Soraya's black eyes, the love that shone there for the huge king. He decided that if the King of Lions couldn't see it, the beast was as blind as a bat.

"So you taunt me in a different way than my mother did," Zud said. He leaped up, raging. "But in the end it is the same. I don't blame you, Queen of Xanra. I know that if I want your hand, I"d have to overthrow your country and enslave you, wouldn't I?"

"I am ready to join my country, and my heart with yours, when I hear it asked of me," the lovely queen answered.

Zud put back his head, laughing. "Well, it's good to have you visit me! It reminds me of the ugly brute I am. I had to enslave the women I made marry me. Perhaps in the end I shall force you to marry me, Soraya, unless your larger army is finally victorious over mine."

Xanra's Queen stood up. Her face was bleak. "I shall leave you now, Great Zud. I come to you no more to ask for peace. I am sorry. Good-by."

The great man sank to his knees and kissed the hem of her skirt. He looked up at her. "Despite my devotion, I pray you will marry a man good enough, handsome enough, great enough for you, O Queen."

"I hope I shall, too," Soraya answered, and Solo knew what she meant, even if the king were too blind to see.

Solo sighed. He reflected that if he'd grown up on his mother's taunts, instead of the love he'd longed for, he, too, might have grown to doubt that *any* woman could care for him.

He scowled. He had to quit finding excuses for the things Zud did. The sheik had already revealed that he was planning an alliance

with THRUSH, that international conspiracy against which U.N.C.L.E. waged constant battle.

He and Zud were deadly enemies. He had to remember that, every minute.

He stood, waiting, until Queen Soraya had walked out of the splendid chamber. For some moments after Xanra's ruler was gone, Zud stood immobile staring impatiently after her.

Finally, he turned. He glared at Kiell. "We must redouble our efforts, Kiell! I want to marry her. Whatever else I have on earth is as nothing unless she is mine."

"If you married her," Solo said, "you need not wage war against Xanra."

Zud's oaths turned the air in the room a hazy blue. He looked as if he'd attack his security minister.

"So you think to taunt me, too, eh, my Harvard delinquent? Just because I let Soraya tease me about my ugliness, you think you can get away with it?"

"No one thinks you're ugly, Zud," said the woman on the floor.

She was in her late twenties, lovely, in spite of a certain prudishness about her that Solo associated with women who turn to religion to the exclusion of everything earthly. He caught his breath, knowing he was seeing Ann Nelson Wheat, the evangelist from Los Angeles.

"Except you yourself," she went on. "You torment yourself and hurt others, because you're still trying to get even with your foolish mother."

"Listen to the evangelist, Kiell! Oh, in America, they allow their women to speak right up, eh? Listen to me, Ann Wheat! Nobody thinks me ugly in this country because they don't dare to! They think I'm ugly. And my mirror swears to it that I resemble a great beast!"

"It's all in your own mind," Ann Wheat said. "Like many other of your wrong ideas."

"Listen to her!" Zud shouted. "Do you know what she has told me? That it is wrong to have more than one wife? What can be wrong? What would a man do with just one wife? Eh, Kiell?"

Solo shrugged, smiling behind his plastic mask.

Zud said, "Enough of this talk. You teach my wives any more of this equality of women, Ann Wheat, and I'll have you beheaded. This time for sure. Meantime, get out of here so I can talk to my minister of security—as though I had any security."

When the woman evangelist was gone, Solo said, "What do you plan to do with her?"

"When our war with Xanra is won, I'll let her go home, if she still wants to. She came here to convert us—perhaps she'll learn much here. But do not presume to ask explanations of your ruler, Zud. I have been too long patient with you."

"Too long, Zud." Solo bowed low.

"Now, we have promised to deliver Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo to THRUSH. What they do with them is THRUSH'S concern, not ours. We want only the aid THRUSH has promised in our battle with Xanra. I want you to deliver Illya Kuryakin, Napoleon Solo and the young Chinese doll as a bonus to THRUSH. Tonight."

Solo swallowed hard. He had no idea where the THRUSH agents were, or where they might be found. He waited, but Zud only stared at him.

"Well!" Zud shouted. "What are you waiting for? This Kuryakin has made one attempt already to escape. I want them delivered now. If they do escape, Kiell, do not dare to show your face to me again, or by Allah, I will lop off your head personally and feed it to the tigers."

"I will not fail you, King of Lions."

Zud's laughter shook the silk draperies at the windows. "For your own sake, Kiell," he roared, "I hope you don't."

His wild laughter followed Napoleon Solo from the chamber.

Solo walked back into the sumptuous chambers where Illya and Wanda were held prisoners.

He close the door. A soldier came to attention at his side.

He gave the young soldier only a glance, seeing that he was youthful, his face serious, his black eyes lighted with the fires of the fanatic. He thought, a fitting subject to be ruled by Zud.

He saw that Illya, Piebr, Wanda and Frun were sitting on the pillows in a circle, laughing, chatting and eating from the bowls of food and fruit. Only Piebr laughed less than the others, seemed preoccupied.

Ordwell remained on the floor, in what seemed to be a catatonic trance.

"What's going on here!" Solo said. "Fraternizing with the enemy?"

"Your men have been working sixteen hours without food, Kiell," Illya said. "We're just feeding them."

"Suppose they poison your food!" Solo shouted.

Both Piebr and Frun leaped to their feet.

Illya said, "Where could we get poison? They issued me these clothes. They brought the food themselves. And Aly David on guard over there should be promoted to general in your army, Kiell. He foiled my escape. You know why? Because though his friends mean much to him, his country means more."

Solo turned his back on the laughing Illya. He said, "Piebr!"

The young detective stepped forward, clicking his heels together.

"What's the matter with you,

Piebr?" Solo said. "You act as if you had the weight of the world on your shoulders."

"No, Master, it is nothing." Piebr stared straight ahead. But tears brimmed his eyes.

Illya shouted. "He's afraid to say anything in your presence. But how can you be so unfeeling? It's his father you shot tonight—as you well know!" Illya's voice rose and hackles stood on Solo's neck. Zouida Berikeen. Piebr's father! "Yet you expect him to perform like a machine."

Solo exhaled heavily. He spoke without looking at the young detective. "Take the night off, Piebr."

"If you please, Master, I'd rather work. I think less, working, about my father. If he was a traitor, he had to die. It is just so hard to believe. But—I do believe you, Master! You would do nothing to harm this country or our ruler."

Solo winced, still unable to look at Piebr. He had not killed Piebr's father, but he wore the mask that Ordwell had used when Ordwell had killed the ambassador. He wondered, as he had wondered for a long time now, who had killed the real Kiell, and had this mask awaiting the arrival of Ordwell on the plane?

He tightened his hands into fists, knowing the answer to that question, even if he didn't know the names of the actual traitors who were double-crossing Zud and all of Zabir. His old friends THRUSH.

He said, voice cold. "Piebr, do you know where the agents of THRUSH await our delivery of these prisoners?"

Piebr nodded.

"Good," Solo said. "Then you will drive us there. Frun and this soldier will go along as guards. Our orders are to leave at once."

Piebr bowed and backed away. "I will arrange for a car right away, Master."

Wanda cried softly. Illya put his arm around her, whispered, "It is no time to think about safety, Wanda. We'll never be safe until we ferret out THRUSH—and destroy it, eh?"

Wanda nodded, understanding. She stood up, ready to go.

In a matter of minutes Piebr returned, saying a car and driver awaited them at a side exit.

Solo thanked him, nodded toward Ordwell. "Take Solo out to the car, leave Frun to guard him and return for us."

He waited until Frun and Piebr struggled with the leg-dragging Ordwell through the door. Then he saw that the young soldier remained standing at attention just inside the room.

"Guard the hall," Solo ordered.

Aly David hesitated a moment, then nodded. "As you command, Master." He stepped through the door, closed it after him.

Solo went directly to Illya, gave

him a loaded pistol to conceal in the folds of his linen robe.

"We've got to make at least the bluff of turning the three of you over to THRUSH," he said.

Illya hid the gun. "I understand. But tell me something. Where'd you get the mask? You know—on you it's an improvement."

"I'll worry about my looks when we learn what nonsense THRUSH is up to."

"Then let's get on the road," Illya said, moving toward the door.

"Don't I get a gun?" Wanda cried.

Solo stared at her. "I should get shot in the back? You hang close to Illya—and keep absolutely quiet, no matter what happens."

With Piebr leading them, and Aly David bringing up the rear, they went hurriedly through the brilliant halls to a waiting car.

The driver sped out a side gate, drove along the high wall to the four-lane highway and turned north toward Kurbot.

Solo, Illya, Piebr and Frun sat on the rear seat. Ordwell was sprawled across their feet. Solo could feel the stocky man stir as the effects of the neuroquixonal wore off.

"How much further?" he asked.

"Not many kilometers, Master. As you know, THRUSH'S agents have taken over Sheik Zud's retreat at Paradise Oasis."

"Yes, of course," Solo said. "So much on my mind."

They were silent for the rest of the drive through the desert night. The stillness pervaded everything, bearing down on the car like a tangible pressure.

Wanda sat huddled between the young driver and Aly David on the front seat. Solo wanted to say something to reassure her, but he

could think of nothing. There were no words.

The car swung off the highway, going east on a secondary road over sand dunes in washboard monotomy.

Suddenly ahead a splash of electric lights illuminated the sky-reaching date palms of Paradise Oasis. Beyond the twenty-room villa, stark oil derricks reared against the roof of heaven, their pumps pounding like the heart of parasites, sucking life from the earth.

Lights burned in every room of the retreat, a concrete and stucco mansion cresting a small hill above the pool of water in the heart of the oasis.

"Something is odd, Master,"

Piebr said. "There are no lights on the exterior of the house."

"Yes." Solo ordered the driver to slow the car. They peered into the darkness, seeing nothing moving in the deep shadows of oleander bushes, lemon trees, fig bushes. Still, Solo shared Piebr's instinct of something being wrong.

"Drive all the way to the front door," he told the chauffeur.

The chauffeur allowed the car to roll to the wide steps before the spacious veranda. The silence continued unbroken. The pumps throbbed away in the darkness.

"Leave your lights burning," Solo said.

Aly David got out of the car first. He walked up to the top step, stood looking around, gun at ready across his chest. Piebr opened one rear door and jumped out, gun in hand, Frun exited from the other. Still nothing happened.

Then Solo bent down, getting out of the car. As his head cleared the protection of the bullet-proofed glass, guns erupted like orange flares in the Stygian darkness and the night went wild.

Solo hit the ground hard, looking around for a target. Piebr crouched in against the car, gun ready.

Above them, Aly David sank to his knee, gun against his shoulder.

Bullets screamed like raging hornets past them. Frun fired once, and there were dozens of answering shorts, the bullets ripping into the car.

Suddenly a woman's voice broke across the sound of gun fire via a public address system. The guns were quieted, waiting.

"Solo," the voice said. "Tell the deluded men with you to lay down their arms, or they will be slain along with you. We have guns fixed on you from the darkness, and from all the windows on the lower floor behind you."

Solo glanced up at the lighted windows, saw the dark forms in them, guns held ready.

"Ordwell," the voice said. "Are you there?"

Solo watched the stocky man pull himself from the car. He managed to stand up, the effects of the neuroquixonal fading swiftly as he moved around.

"I'm here," Ordwell called.

"Then disarm them," the woman's voice ordered. "All of them. Then march them into the house." Her voice took on an air of contempt. "THRUSH hopes you can accomplish this."

Solo heard Orwell gasp in rage, but he made no reply. He moved from Piebr to Aly David to Frun, gathering the weapons. A man appeared from the darkness and collected them. Then Ordwell came close to Solo.

"Your gun, Mr. Solo," he said.

Solo heard Piebr's sharp intake of breath. He did not glance toward the young detective.

Ordwell took the gun, barrel first, closed his fist over it and coldly back-handed Solo across the head with it.

Solo staggered to his knees, feeling the blood trickling from the cut down the inside of the plastic mask. For a moment all the date palms were strung with glittering stars of a million hues, and then darkness settled. He gritted his teeth, managed to hang on to consciousness.

He heard Ordwell snarling at him. "On your feet. Move, Solo. Or I'll kill you, just as I killed that fool ambassador in the airport terminal."

Solo managed to pull himself up slowly. Illya came out of the car, supported him. And after a moment, Piebr stepped close to him, lending the strength of his arm, Solo was thankful Piebr finally knew the truth about the senseless slaying of his father.

Piebr whispered savagely, "Somehow, by the grace of Allah, we will get out of this. I know now they slew not only my good and faithful father, but also the protector of my country, the real Kiell."

"Shut up!" Ordwell said. "Get him inside the house. Move. All of you."

They were herded into a living room, shut off from other rooms by silken draperies of bright colors. Solo staggered slightly as he walked. He would have fallen except that Piebr and Illya supported him. Objects and people in the room wavered before his eyes.

They stood some moments in this room, alone. Even Ordwell grew restive. He glared around at the silken draperies. "Well, what's wrong now? Here they are. THRUSH wanted Solo and Kuryakin delivered as hostages. Here they are!"

Ordwell Slybrough laughed in triumph. He gripped the plastic mask over Solo's face, slipped a knife blade under it and cut it away.

He jerked it off Solo's head. He stared a moment in sadsitic satisfaction at the cut across Solo's temple, the blood streaming along his cheek.

"Here he is!" he shouted.

The silken drapes parted and Pretty Wilde came through them, followed by two scawling native gunmen.

Solo stared at her, the gash in his temple for the moment forgotten, or supplanted by a more poignant agony. Pretty Wilde was lovelier than ever in black blouse and black stretch pants which seemed annealed to her stockpiled elegance.

Even Illya Kuryakin whistled faintly between his teeth.

She smiled at Solo. "Well, Tiger. Here we are. We meet again."

Solo stared at her. "A THRUSH agent," he said.

"That's right, Tiger." She

laughed. "I told you I was—Pretty Wilde."

"You really are," Solo said.

ACT IV
INCIDENT OF THE VOLATILE AGENT

AT GUNPOINT, Pretty Wilde and her silent executioners ushered Solo and Kuryakin through silken drapes into a smaller room, completely remodeled in electronic modern.

The men from U.N.C.L.E. stared in astonishment at this chamber banked with the sort of broadcasting and receiving equipment one might expect to find in the home plant of RCA.

Three men with headphones sat in chairs that glided silently on casters from one machine to the next. Bright eyes of varying colors flashed across the faces of the sets.

One of the technicians gave all of his attention to a complex rectangular box topped with a seventeen-inch television tube set at an angle. The metal machine hummed to life; the black eye of the screen lightened, brightened, and then held, as if waiting.

"All of this just for us, Pretty?" Solo said.

Pretty glanced at him along the nose of her gun. "You might say that. It offers you your only chance to leave here alive."

"I for one am almost morbidly interested in this idea," Solo said.

"And I," Kuryakin agreed.

"As you see, it's a suggestion that's caught right on with both of us," Solo said. "Please tell us more."

"It's very simple. One of our scientists, Dr. Polar Fuch, on the verge of a breakdown, and suffering delusions, managed to steal a vital machine from us."

"Ah, yes. The atom separator," Solo said, recalling Waverly's demonstrating this weapon to him in United Network headquarters. "A machine that Dr. Fuch invented."

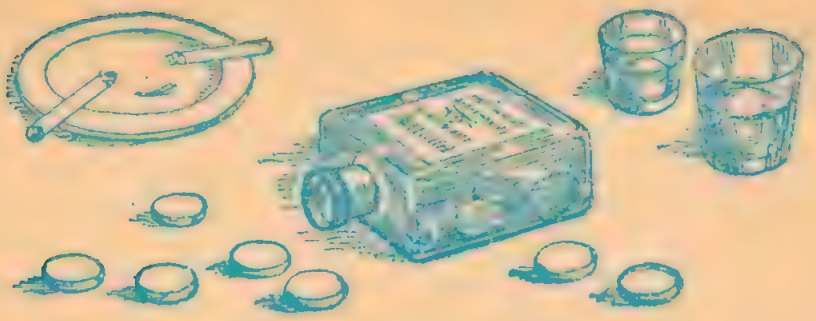
"A non-essential detail, since he was working for us, and all of his creations automatically became—"

"A machine he planned for peaceful analysis, which is not the use THRUSH planned for it," Solo persisted.

"Another quibbling detail," Pretty said, shrugging. "The important fact to us, and you two, is that the machine is ours, and we want it back. Now. We're willing to make a trade with United Network Command. Your lives, and the bonus life of that girl in there, in exchange for *our* machine."

Solo shrugged. "We haven't the authority to—"

"Of course you haven't! But we can talk to Alexander Waverly via this sender-receiver. Give us the channel, and we'll discuss the trade with Waverly. If he agrees to deliver the machine to an address



we'll give him in Manhattan, we will escort you safely to the air terminal at Kurbot."

"We couldn't do that," Solo said. "Breach of security."

"I forgot to tell you. You have five minutes to make up your minds."

"If you kill us, you won't have much bargaining power, will you?" Solo said.

Pretty Wilde gave him a twisted smile. "We'll keep the two of you alive only long enough to exhaust all means of making a trade. But that girl in there—the other people with you—they are expendable. They mean nothing to us. We will systematically kill them, starting with the girl, beginning in just five minutes."

Solo winced, glancing at Illya.

Pretty Wilde said, "Have you the authority to sentence that girl to certain death in—four and one-half minutes?"

"Time," Illya said, lifting his hand. "Maybe it's because I've been so close to death these past weeks. I think we ought to cooperate. Solo. Give them the channel. As soon as they contact Waverly this once, technicians will scramble the signals in that channel, change the wave-length. What can we lose, except our lives?"

After a second Napoleon Solo merely nodded, and Illya Kuryakin said smiling into Pretty Wilde's sardonic face: "Channel D, my pretty little cobra. And hurry, will you?"

Pretty Wilde jerked her head toward the waiting technician. He turned knobs, pressed buttons. The hum deepened, then rose to a keening wail, gradually waned. Jagged lines on the picture-tube screen settled into the interior of the U.N.C.L.E. Command Room and then closed in on Alexander Waverly's face.

"Can you see us, Mr. Waverly?" Pretty asked, speaking into a microphone.

"Yes. You're coming in beautifully. Lovely girl. I hope you are friendly."

"That's up to you, Mr. Waverly," Pretty Wilde said. "We show you THRUSH'S latest prize."

Solo and Kuryakin were photo-

graphed by the machine camera. Waverly said, "Yes. Well, they're not nearly as eye-catching as you are. But I'm glad to see them."

"If you want them alive, you will agree to return the atom-separator to ten-twenty West Eight Street in Manhattan. It will do your agents no good to go there. It is merely a place for receiving this particular shipment."

"I was sure of that," Waverly said.

"Agree, we'll return Solo and Kuryakin. Refuse, and THRUSH will kill them. You'll agree, Mr. Waverly, that THRUSH has no compunctions about killing them THRUSH has many scores to settle with them. Since time is important, I'll give you one minute to make up your mind."

Waverly gave her his chilliest grin across the thousands of miles. "I cannot give you a direct answer. Since word came that both my agents had fallen into THRUSH'S hands, I've been expecting to get some sort of offer like this. We are prepared with a counter offer."

"Here's where we learn just how expendable we are," Illya whispered.

"We authorize Solo and Kuryakin to make the decision about returning the atom separator," Waverly said, "knowing what destruction such a lethal weapon could wreak in THRUSH'S conscienceless possession, the lives and property lost—"

"When he waves the flag," Illya said, "I'm walking out."

"—if they call back in one hour saying they want the machine returned to you, we will agree to do it. When they get in touch with our people at the air terminal at Kurbot, instant delivery of said machine will be made to the address here in Manhattan. Over and out."

The screen flickered, became a scrambled pattern of jagged lines, screeching interference.

"They've scrambled channel D out of existence," Illya said.

Solo nodded. "You know what that means, don't you?"

"I'm way ahead of you. It means we're expendable, that Waverly doesn't expect to hear from us again."

Pretty stared at them in frustration and rage. "How will you get in touch with him now?"

Solo gave her a pained smile. "That's it, Pretty. We *can't* get in touch with him now. Not through any of your infernal gadgets. The next move is up to THRUSH."

TWO

ILLYA PROWLED the impregnable cellar under Zud's oasis retreat like a lynx unable to believe a cage could hold him.

Along the walls, the chauffeur, Aly David, Frun and Piebr sat in round-shouldered dejection. Wanda slumped on a sack of grain, staring unseeingly at the floor.

Solo tested the walls, found no weakness, no object his ingenuity could convert to offensive weaponry. He leaned against the wall.

"We've got to agree to give THRUSH the machine, Illya," Solo decided. The other hostages glanced up, not daring to hope. "These people will die first, starting in less than an hour now. We don't have the right to sacrifice them."

"We voted," Aly David said. The others nodded in assent. "We are more fortunate than you and Kuryakin in that we die first."

"Yes," Piebr said. "The waiting is the worst."

"No!" Solo straightened. "We've got to get out of here. If we only had a gun."

Illya withdrew the automatic Solo had given him at the palace.

Solo stared at him. "How did they miss that?"

Illya shrugged. "Ordwell. Wasn't thinking straight. Never occurred to him you'd arm a prisoner —me."

Aly David came up off the floor without touching his hands to it. His dark face glowed.

"Give me one gun, and I'll turn it into an arsenal!" he shouted.

Solo nodded. Illya handed over the gun.

Aly hefted it a moment in his hand, grinning, then started toward the door.

"Hold it," Solo said.

Aly David paused. Solo ripped open the seed sack. "Everybody. Hands full of seed."

They all scooped up seed. Solo lined them on each side of the door. Aly David took aim on the lock, fired once. The thick door quivered, hung there, slightly ajar.

In that instant a heavy boot thrust it open and an armed guard burst through, rifle up.

Handsful of seed struck him in the face, blinding him, stopping him for the fraction of a second. It was too long. Aly David struck him with the gun butt neatly behind the ear and he pitched face first to the floor.

Frun caught up the rifle before it struck the floor and Piebr knelt, taking the hand gun from the guard's holster.

At the open door, Aly David wheeled around and fired upward. A second guard toppled down the stone steps. Illya got the second guard's rifle, and Solo snatched the hand gun from his holster. They were already moving up the long stairs.

Wanda wailed, "I still don't have a gun!"

Solo said, "You stay right here at the head of these stairs until we clear a way out of here. We'll come back for you." When she opened her mouth to protest, he rasped, "That's an order, Wanda!"

She nodded miserably.

He closed the stairwell door, leaving it slightly ajar. The sound of running men was heard from the

corridors. Solo motioned his party to fan out.

As the men came through the door, the waiting men, crouched along the walls, shot them. They moved forward, room to room.

Illya scouted ahead. He saw movement in draperies, fired into it. Two snipers fell forward, ripping down the draperies with them.

They reached the front room. Solo jerked his head toward the radio room. Illya shot the door open, then emptied the rifle into the sending sets.

"I'll get Wanda," Solo said. The others crowded at the front door, waiting, alert as Solo turned.

Across the foyer, Pretty Wilde appeared. "I think you'll stay where you are, Mr. Solo."

Solo stared at her. Pretty gave him a cold smile. "Did you think I was a fool like those men, to run into your trap?" She motioned with the machine pistol. "Drop those guns. All of you. I can cut you down with this if you move."

"Drop the guns," Solo said, shrugging helplessly.

"You are wise, Mr. Solo," Pretty Wilde said. "Now if you'll be smart enough to tell your superiors we have run out of patience and want our machine." She lifted her voice. "Ordwell! Come down here and keep these prisoners covered."

A whisper of sound behind Pretty Wilde made her shiver. But she hesitated, afraid for the moment to take her gaze off the five prisoners. When she had to swing around, it was too late.

Wanda cracked her across the skull with the spiked heel of her slipper. Pretty Wilde crumpled to the floor. "I could have done so much better," Wanda wailed across the room at Solo, "if I'd just had a gun!"

Piebr dropped to his knee, grabbed up an automatic as Ordwell ran out to the head of the stairs.

Aly and Illya, too, caught up guns as Ordwell jerked up a machine pistol, but Piebr screamed, "No! He's mine!"

Piebr fired. His bullet struck Ordwell cleanly in the solar plexus. In a slow movement, Ordwell Slybrough dropped the machine pistol and then toppled over and over down the wide stairway.

As he reached the landing, Piebr was there. Zouida's son emptied the gun into the body of his father's slayer. Then he threw the gun down upon the bullet-riddled killer.

When Piebr turned, his eyes were bright with tears, but his head tilted in triumph.

Solo caught Wanda in the circle of his arm. He laughed down into her face. "Come on, Agent Kim! You just became one of the boys! And now, in the name of Allah, let's get out of here."

* * *

THE BLACK CAR raced toward the iron gates in the palace wall.

The driver pressed the horn hard.

After a moment the gates were shoved open and the car sped through.

Napoleon Solo whistled as their limousine was braked down at the base of the forty steps. There were no servants out to greet them today, but from all sides green-suited soldiers converged on them, bayonets reflecting the sun blindingly.

"I knew we were heroes," Illya Kuryakin said in sarcasm, "but I never expected a greeting like this."

"Any twenty-one gun salutes we get will be in our backs," Solo agreed, watching the threatening faces of the soldiers.

A dark-skinned officer jerked the door open and screamed orders at them in a dialect.

Solo glanced helplessly at Piebr. "What'd he say?"

Aly David spoke over his shoulder. "We are to get out of the car slowly, with our hands locked on top of our heads."

Solo smiled weakly. "If this is a friendly greeting," he said, "it loses something in translation."

Sheik Zud padded about the eighty-by-fifty conference chamber. The huge council room looked too small to contain the huge man and his massive grief.

Half the room was in darkness.

When Solo, Kuryakin and the others were led into the council room, Zud let them stand for some moments while he strode back and forth, his lion's face contorted with a sadness that furrowed it from brow to jawline.

At last, he turned and faced them. "Piebr!"

Zouida's son stepped forward and knelt near the table in the center of the light near his ruler. "Your Majesty?" he said.

"Piebr, I am being betrayed! By the only people I trusted and loved with all my heart."

"No, Majesty!"

Zud's roar shook the chandeliers, echoed inside the long room. "First, your father. Now you! Gone over to the enemy!"

"Majesty, no! My own father gave his life serving you with his last breath, as I will do if Allah grants it!"

"Don't lie!" Zud roared. "Look!" He waved his arm and an unseen servant snapped a switch. A single, high-powered light played down on a body laid out on a high table draped with robes. The onlookers held their breath.

"Kiell," Piebr whispered.

"Yes. Kiell. We found his body. Slain. Stuffed into a baggage locker at the Kurbot airport! The great Kiell! To be so foully treated in death! Did you kill him? Or did that one there?"

He thrust out his arm, pointing an accusing finger at Solo. "You're the one who impersonated Kiell, aren't you? Clever! In a plastic mask. I could not believe it was Kiell, and yet my heart would not believe I could lose Kiell and Zouida in the same moment."

"No, Majesty!" Piebr cried in anguish. "None of us in this room has betrayed you. We have slain the man who killed both Kiell and my father! The conspiracy of these people was against you, Majesty, not in your interests."

"How can you know of this?" Zud shouted.

Solo stepped forward. "Your Majesty, Piebr speaks the truth. THRUSH agreed to aid you in a war against Xanra, and in exchange you were to deliver Kuryakin and me to be held as hostages by THRUSH. Isn't that true?"

"I need aid in my battle!" Zud shouted. "Xanra is four times the size of my country, with ten times the population! I take aid where I can find it."

"Yes. And did you know that THRUSH meant to use Illya Kuryakin and me to achieve the return of a lethal war machine?"

"Yes!" Zud strode back and forth beyond the table. "I was told the weapon would be a great aid in my unequal battle."

"THRUSH wanted to use that weapon—as fearful and evil as the use of the hydrogen bomb. Devasting. Did you want Xanra laid waste?"

Zud tilted his leonine head, jaw thrust forward, but finally he shook his head, his massive shoulders slumping. "I did not understand."

"THRUSH was using you. THRUSH would have helped you win the war against Xanra. But Xanra would be rubble, its people destroyed or deformed. Then the world would see the graphic demonstration of THRUSH'S newest weapon. That was what THRUSH wanted. And when the war with Xanra was ended, its queen victim of that inhuman machine—"

"No!" The growl of agony was torn from Zud's throat.

"Yes!" Solo said relentlessly. "And you would have ended up a puppet of THRUSH, without power, without glory—to live out your life knowing what you had done to your neighbors in a war that doesn't even need to be fought."

Zud straightened to his full height, staring down at Solo. "What are you saying—a useless war?"

"You know it, King Zud. In your heart. Better than I do. Why did you go to war with Xanra? To prove that you could conquer it. To prove to its queen—as you once

proved to your mother—how great you were. But you didn't need to do that. Queen Soraya knows your greatness. She loves you."

"What? No woman so beautiful could love such a beast as I."

"Then why did she come here repeatedly on missions of peace, King Zud? Her country is larger, richer than yours. She didn't have to sue for peace, but she did! She even talked of marriage with you."

"No woman would marry me, unless she was forced into it."

"I heard her say she would."

"To stop the war. Only to stop the war."

"No. She loves you. Anyone but you could see it. Just as you should be able to see that Piebr here is as loyal as the slain Kiel, and trained by him to take his place. And Frun —meant to be a diplomat, like the lamented Zouida. And—"

"And Aly David, your most loyal soldier!" Illya Kuryakin said. "Fighting for you, even when his heart broke because he disagreed with what you were doing to Queen Soraya and Xanra. A brilliant soldier, waiting to make your untried armies great."

"Young men," Solo said, "anxious to serve you with their hearts and minds. Ready to make this nation—and you—greater than ever. Especially when you are joined in alliance with the Queen of Xanra through marriage."

Zud prowled the carpeting. He stared at Napoleon Solo, at Illya Kuryakin, at the young men awaiting his decision.

The door of the council chambers was thrown open. A young army officer burst through.

Zud raged. "How dare you burst unannounced—"

"Majesty!" The officer prostrated himself before the sheik. "Word comes that a woman named Pretty Wilde, with the mercenary troops sent into Zabir to aid you, have revolted against you. They have taken over all the refineries."

Zud shook his head. "We'll get them back." He looked around, uncertainly. "It may take a bit of time, but—"

"Majesty. That is only part of the communique. This army has kidnaped Queen Soraya of Xanra as she returned under our escort to her own border. She is being held hostage until you, O King of Lions, agree to carry out your contract with THRUSH."

Zud sank into one of the chairs beside the table. His wide shoulders sagged, his eyes held torment, and he gazed about, distracted.

Aly David stepped forward. "Majesty, if you would permit, I'll take an army and retrieve the refineries. I vow to drive every mercenary across our borders."

Sheik Zud stared for one more moment at the zeal burning in Aly David's black eyes. He made his decision, and leaped to his feet.

"So be it!" He shouted. "I name you, Aly David, commander of all

my troops. I charge you to drive out the mercenary and the invader."

Aly David knelt. "I pledge my life to it."

Zud moved quickly to Frun. "And you, Frun, will immediately assume the duties of the late Ambassador Zouida Berikeen. You will notify all nations that Zabir honors no false alliances with any secret conspiracies, that from this day Zabir intends to take its place among the honorable nations of the world."

Frun knelt beside Aly David. "Allah hears my vow to serve you now and forever, sire."

Zud nodded impatiently. "Before you leave to attend the United Nations sessions, I request that go at once to Xanra and assure that nation that all warlike threats from Zabir are ended from this hour. Our forces will withdraw to stated boundaries. And that my secret police will find their queen and restore her, or I, Zud, place my own life in forfeit for hers."

"It will be done," Frun said. He got up from his knee, kissed the king's ring and strode from the room, followed quickly by Aly David.

"If Kiell were alive," Zud said, his voice quavering, "I would say to him, 'Kiell, find Soraya, return her to safety, and punish those who threaten her with harm.' "

He gazed about the room, distracted. "I would say this much to Kiell, and I would know it would be done as surely as the east sky across the desert of Zur will burn with tomorrow's dawn."

He pressed his huge hands over his face. "I would know it. As I breathed, I would know it. Ah, without you, Kiell—" he stretched out his arm toward the body on the silken bier. "Without you, I am truly lost."

Piebr stepped forward and knelt. "Majesty, I am not Kiell. I was only his assistant. I cannot vow to you as Kiell would have done. But, Sire, I am the son of Zouida Berikeen. I can swear to my ruler that my last breath will be spent in assuring the safety of Queen Soraya if you will but allow me this chance to serve you."

Zud straightened, shaking himself, as if returning to this moment from his distracted thoughts. He stared at Piebr vacantly. He said, "Oh, Piebr, forgive me. I am overwhelmed with grief. I name you minister of security. Let your first duty be the escorting of these people to the air terminal of Kurbot and secure their safe passage to New York."

"But your Majesty! Queen Soraya!"

Zud shook his head and smiled. "You are too young, Piebr. I remember when you played at your father's knee in this room. I will not imperil your life by matching you against the professional killers trained by THRUSH. No. We

must let the army handle this and pray Allah for Soraya's safety."

Solo said, "Forgive me, Majesty. I realize you have been patient, and I have spoken too much. But one suggestion?"

"Speak," Zud said.

"I know your reluctance to trust

the skills of a man you remember as a child, close to you. But Piebr is a clever and resourceful man, trained by Kiell himself. Perhaps Kiell meant that Piebr would some day replace him. Piebr must be tried under fire if he is ever to serve you as Kiell did. And I must warn you that when THRUSH realizes you will not knuckle under, they may well slay Soraya in order to set Xanra forever against you."

"Zud shook his head. "What then can we do?"

"Trust Piebr. Set him in charge. Trust him. Allow me, and my agents to aid him. Order Aly David to move his armies to within sight of the mercenaries—but to hold their fire until Piebr, with us, can locate and confer with the THRUSH people for Soraya's safety."

Zud waved his arm, nodded. "So be it. And may Allah speed you and bless you."

* * *

PIEBR DROVE the forward jeep. In it rode two of his plain clothes operatives, armed with hand guns, equipped with hidden machine pistols and hand grenades.

Solo drove the second jeep. Illya slouched beside him, the wind thrusting through his fair hair. Wanda sat in the back seat, armed with a machine pistol which she held across her lap.

Piebr's intelligence had placed Pretty Wilde, the THRUSH operatives working for her, and their royal prisoner at the refinery near El Massif.

A mile from the refinery Piebr halted. One of his operatives slid under the wheel of the forward jeep. Piebr walked back to where Solo had braked the second car.

"I will drive from here," Piebr said. He glanced at Wanda. "You will hide all guns and grenades

when we reach the gate. Our plan is that we will get in to the THRUSH agent in charge by agreeing to exchange the three of you for the kidnaped queen."

Napoleon Solo moved over. Illya Kuryakin sat in the rear with Wanda. Piebr drove past the other jeep, and so they arrived at the chain-link fences surrounding the huge refinery. Even in the darkness the great storage tanks gleamed metallically, strung together by elephantine pipes.

Solo whistled. Troops of mercenaries lined the roads, the fences, stood guard at all the tanks and pumping stations. They were halted at the gate while the officer in charge made a phone call.

The duty officer replaced the receiver, stepped out of the guard shack. "Search them and send them in."

Soldiers searched the two jeeps, confiscated all weapons and grenades. Wanda's face sagged as she watched her machine pistol added to the stack inside the guard shack.

Three weapon carriers pulled alongside the jeeps and convoyed them to a brightly lighted administration building. A dozen armed mercenaries marched the six prisoners into the tiled-floored building. Sandbags had been placed near windows and doors.

At a desk in the rear of a large, well-illuminated office Pretty Wilde sat with a squad of hand-picked personal body guards.

Pretty wore a bandage jauntily about her head. She stared malevolently at Wanda. Near a window Queen Soraya of Xanra sat with two ladies-in-waiting at her knees.

"King Zud offers the agents of U.N.C.L.E. in exchange for the life and safety of Queen Xanra," Piebr said.

Pretty Wilde smiled coldly at the new minister of security. "You speak boldly for an unarmed man."

Piebr did not blink. "We are indeed unarmed. But this refinery is surrounded by five thousand troops, led by General Aly David."

Pretty considered this. "Is Zud welching on his agreement with THRUSH? Our agreement to aid him in conquering Xanra, in return for certain concessions?"

Piebr smiled coldly. "Let's say the king has reconsidered. Let me add that momentarily a flash gun will be fired over the dunes. This is the signal for our troops to attack this refinery. Small cannon are at this moment trained on those storage tanks. Does one need to do more than suggest what would happen if only one cannon scores a hit on one tank?"

Solo saw Pretty Wilde's lovely face pale. "You play a rough game of poker, don't you?"

"Never deceive yourself that I am bluffing. I suggest that you hastily agree that my men and I remove Queen Soraya from this imperiled zone. I believe even THRUSH might have great diffi-

culty recovering from her death in these circumstances."

Pretty waved her arm. "Take her and her sniveling wenches. Get her out of here."

Piebr nodded. He and his men strode across the room, escorted the queen and the frightened ladies-in-waiting out of the door to a jeep. The soldiers stepped back and stood aside as the jeep raced toward the gates.

At the precise instant that Piebr's jeep hurtled through the gate, a flare burst like a meteor over the dunes outside the refinery.

Its orange light illuminated the office. Pretty Wilde gazed around in panic.

"They're attacking. Kill these three people and let's get out of here," she shouted at her bodyguard.

But Illya Kuryakin shook his arm and let a hand grenade roll from the folds of his silk robe. "Here's one they missed!" He jerked out the pin. "Now. Pretty

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THE UNSPEAKABLE AFFAIR

Mute, helpless, they tried vainly to speak and were no more, the gallant men who had unmasked a ghastly THRUSH plot to enslave the world—and who must take their secret to the grave!

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Now—Illya and Solo in a brand new U.N.C.L.E novel every month for your reading pleasure. Reserve next month's issue now at your favorite newsdealers!

Wilde, your men can shoot me, but we'll all go up in the biggest holocaust this part of the world has seen since Gomorrah burned."

"Hold your fire!" Pretty Wilde screamed in panic.

Illya Kuryakin jerked his head toward the doors. Distantly they heard gunfire. It grew louder as Aly David's men approached, full speed.

Solo leaped into the jeep, started the engine. Wanda dove into the rear, head first, striking the seat and lying there, face down.

Solo had the car in motion as Illya sprang into the other seat. All over the refinery, mercenaries were running to their battle stations.

Solo shouted at Illya. "You're still carrying that grenade!"

"Why waste it on her?" Illya shouted.

As they roared past a huge storage tank, Illya lobbed the grenade toward it. For an instant, breathless silence hung over the desert.

"Faster! Faster!" Illya Kuryakin shouted.

At that instant, the grenade exploded. Solo pressed harder on the gas. The exploding grenade burst the seam of the tank, and the second explosion followed immediately. The earth rumbled, shivering. The jeep danced wildly, turning all the way around before Napoleon Solo could right it.

He straightened the jeep in the road again, fixed a course on the gate, pressed the accelerator as a second tank exploded, turning the sky white and the world a fiery crimson.

The jeep danced, bounced, lurched around. Solo fought the wheel, straightening it. The outward blast of air, the savage pull of the vacuum held the car, trembling.

"Faster!" Illya shouted in Solo's ears, hanging on to the windshield with all his strength. The heat was intense, unbearable. Ahead of them stretched the dark empty desert, so close, but suddenly an eternity removed beyond the perimeter of the exploding refinery. "Can't you go faster?"

"I've got the pedal on the floor now!" Napoleon Solo shouted.

But Illya Kuryakin couldn't even hear him above the scream of the flames, the roar of chain explosions. The fire reached out after them. Solo thrust down on the gas as hard as he could, looking back across his shoulder.

They'd get away, by a whisker. No one else would, barring a miracle. That [redacted] solid flame was too pulverizing in its intensity to offer any chance for survival.

Solo sighed. Pretty Wilde had been a lot of woman. It was hard to think of her charred and dead. What a waste of loveliness!

But there was new work to be done, new girls to meet. He nodded, forced the car forward into the night, smiling.

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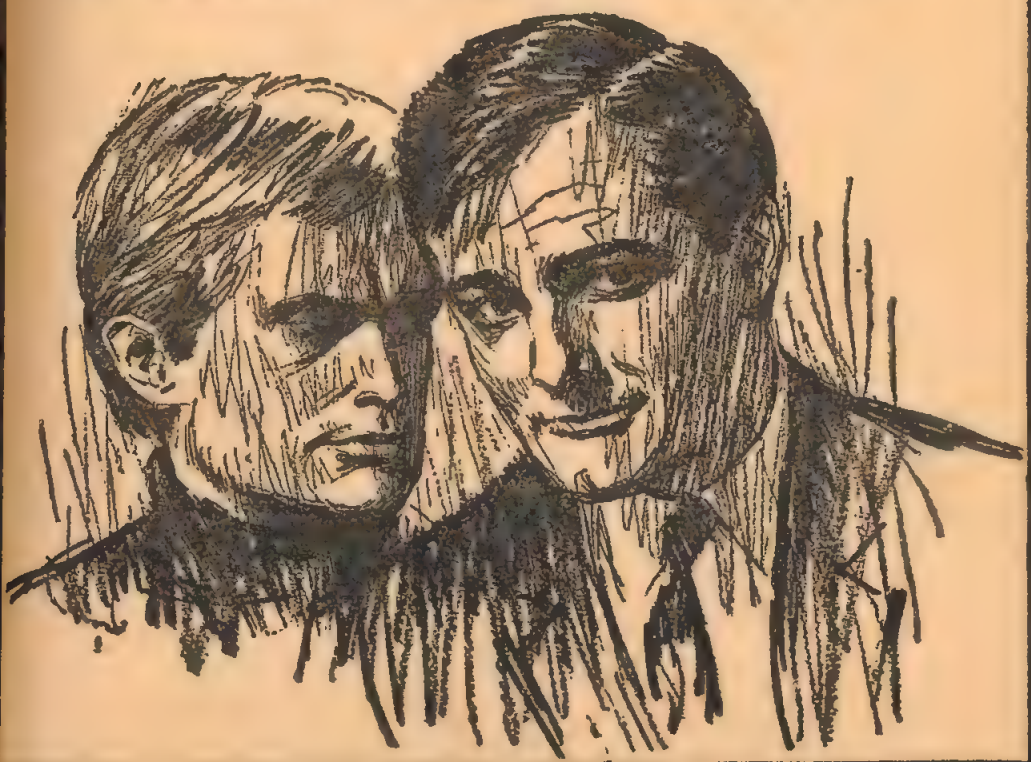

An OPERATIONS UNKNOWN Story

INTRIGUE AT TARANTO

Two perils faced him in that silent house. A princess who waited for a man— and Death, who waited for no one!

by T. C. McCLARY

SAMMY SAMOS came through the electronic *frisk alley* to the chief's sanctum sanctorum and stood until an index finger twiddled at him to be seated.

The chief was almost completely hidden behind the dossier he was reading. Occasionally, his bald head showed the few hairs combed horizontally across his shiny top, or his silver-rimmed bifocals glinted.

"Dear, dear," he clucked with disapproval. "Treacherous . . . deceitful . . . outright flagrant defiance of the Geneva Conference . . . actually immoral . . . how far will enemy intrigue go?"

He swiveled around to stare out the one way windows at Dupont Circle for a space, then swiveled back and tapped the pages of the dossier into neat alignment. His lips pursed as he regarded Samos with the look of a school prexy being forced to give the school's bad boy a *magna cum laude*.

"Turk, Afghan, Kurd, Ghurka, Greek," he considered. "Probably a little Armenian and Tartar thrown in. Bona fide son of a son of an Arabian sheik. A magnificent mongrel and a completely predatory beast. Entirely reliable, because he will always go for the highest buck, and he is smart enough to know we have it."

The chief slumped back in his chair and laced his hands to rest

upon his balloonlike belly. "About that trip to Italy," he murmured.

"Yes sir," Samos said, although this was the first he'd heard of it.

"It is a rather indecent proposal to put to an agent, even in this—ah—rather unorthodox business. Eh?"

"I understand, sir," Samos said, and wondered what he understood.

"Of course it is not quite as if she were a monster," the chief went on. "As a matter of fact, she is one of the most attractive queens in the Middle East. With any luck, you will also make fifty thousand dollars out of it. Let us hope that the CIA does not get stuffy about our accepting enemy funds."

Let us hope they do not ever have to learn about it, Samos thought privately.

"And you thoroughly understand the delicacy of impersonating a prince to perfection, while having the queen realize you are not the prince, yet not having her know that you know she knows?"

Sammy thought that was quite a mouthful and showed alert appreciation.

"I don't know how to counsel you about the intimacy of the—ah—conjugal relationship," the chief fretted paternally.

Samos sat forward. "Pardon me, sir?"

The chief sat up, blushing slightly. "I have wracked my brains to think of an alternative, but I can't. You will simply have to be her husband—in every sense of the word."

"While I am impersonating the prince?"

The chief's eyes grew noticeably chilly. "Naturally while you are impersonating the prince. There has to be some morality to this!"

"Of course, sir."

"After all, we're not living in the dissolute era of Don Juan."

"Naturally not sir. I will handle it with tact."

"But not too much tact!" the chief warned. "You see, she hates the prince so much that she may easily wear ear stops and blinders, which she has been known to."

"During the—er—conjugal felicities?" Samos gasped.

"Precisely. It points up why no alternative to having her discover your perfidity is possible. Her hatred may blind her to discerning any difference between you and the prince."

Samos had his own private opinion, but one did not quibble with the chief of *Operation Unknown.*

"So, much as I deplore the harrowing amorality of the situation, I must burden you with it as a sacrifice to be made in line of duty. Sometime we must find a discreet means of apologizing to the princess, also."

"Definitely, sir."

The chief made steeples of his fingers and regarded them with in-

tense interest as if he had never seen them before, so that when he began speaking it was as if a third person had entered the room unobserved.

"You are familiar with the recent Communist coup, the overthrow of Prince Yussef's government. Aside from politics, his influence among the Moslems is enormous. Should it come to a test, his word alone could almost certainly start, or stop, a popular Moslem uprising against the West."

"He is pro West, is he not, sir?"

"We have regarded him as a neutral. For that reason, he was granted asylum in the United States by undercover agents on hand at the time he was deposed. Information has now reached us which makes that act highly dangerous to Anglo-American interests. But the asylum cannot be revoked without risking exposure of our topmost contact behind the Iron Curtain. Yet it is vital that the prince must not be able to avail himself of our—ah—hospitality."

Sammy Samos lapsed into waggling his trigger finger.

"Samos!" the chief barked frostily. "We do not countenance cold blooded assassination."

Samos managed an expression of innocence in time. "I was thinking, sir, of what the MVD would do if they knew where he was hiding."

"He is hiding in the Aegean isles on his semi-annual absinthe debauch, accompanied by two belly dancers and his valet and bodyguard, Kurt Kessler. The MVD took him there."

"After the coup that threw him off his throne?"

"The coup was a ruse as cover so that we would grant him asylum. In spite of being an alcoholic and a leecher, the prince is an extremely brilliant political strategist. If he comes here, his job will be to organize the Moslem nations of the U.N. into a block to obstruct Anglo-American diplomacy. You can see the menace, not an identifiable political threat, but the threat of a Holy War."

"But his government was neutral."

"Smoke screen. He is one of Moscow's most highly rated secret puppets."

"No wonder he had to exile the princess Nida. She must have smelled a rat."

"The princess arranged her own exile to get away from him. In a sense, she is of higher Communist level than he is in that she is a direct agent, with direct contact with the Kremlin."

Samos pinched his lips closed with thumb and forefinger and wished the chief would invite him to smoke.

"Before the estimated date of the prince's usual d.t's," the chief went on, in the tone of a history

professor in classroom, "Yussef will fly to Taranto, Italy, to visit the princess at her villa. Ostensibly, this visit will be to assure American womanhood of the royal couple's continued felicity and remove some of the stigma of the harem of hussies he is rumored to have maintained with American dollars.

"Actually, the purpose of his visit will be to pick up fifty thousand dollars supplied by the Communists to tide him over until they can set him up more munificently here."

"Perhaps the pretense of felicity does not extend to the royal bower, sir?"

"It will. Moscow has ordered it for appearance sake. After all, servants will talk here and there about such matters."

"I don't imagine that the servants will be present in the boudoir, sir."

"Servants have a sixth sense in these matters. Also, being the brutish lecher and drunk that he is, the prince will undoubtedly demand his wedded rights."

Without moving his downcast face, the chief glanced up through the top part of his bifocals. "At that point, *you* will be the prince."

Sammy Samos made the sign of Mohammet. "In the duty of my country, I can be loathsome, sir."

"One of the points considered in your evaluation," the chief nodded "Now due, no doubt, to some common tribal ancestor, you bear an almost twin-like native resemblance to the prince—not as he is, but as he should look, if he had remained a good boy, as it were.

"Fortunately, the servants at the villa are not acquainted with the prince first hand, and will have little opportunity to see him at close range prior to your visitation. Presumably, except perhaps for madame's maid, they will not see you at all. However, should it be impossible to evade them entirely, try to behave in such manner that any difference in appearance may be explained by difference in sobriety at various points."

The chief touched a button on a control panel. The room darkened and a movie projector beamed on the great gilt mirror over the Georgian fireplace. A movie strip showed intermixed movies and stills of the prince in various costumes, and in total lack of costume. They were followed by similar shots of Sammy Samos, some of which had been retouched to adorn him with Yussef's uniforms, and some of which had been taken in his own bedroom.

"I just hope your agents replaced my ceiling so it doesn't fall on my back some night," Samos said grimly. He looked at the movies, "Yussef is plumper and balder."

"Nothing too noticable under the circumstances," the chief said. "She has not seen him for six years.

At dinner he will be wearing his turban and loose robe of state."

"There are other differences even an estranged wife will notice."

The chief rubbed his dry hands and smiled. "Precisely. She will of course realize that you are a very beautifully contrived fraud. But she will need time to puzzle whether she is being duped by the Communists themselves, or by one of us, which will give you chance to vanish before she notifies the MVD that Yussef is an impostor."

"Where will he be?"

"Enjoying temporary attrition from absinthe in his private suite at the villa. When the MVD arrives the following morning, he will be in no condition to make head or tail of things, or to properly answer their interrogation. As they will be Rome agents, not intimately acquainted with him, they have to fly him back to his homeland for reliable identification."

"Then his doctor and others will verify him. What is gained?"

"His doctors and other close counsel suffered heavily from his abdication and blame him bitterly for holding his troops in barracks during the uprising. When they see what is up, a very substantial number of them will seriously doubt if he is the real Prince Yussef. It is probable that the Communists will treat him as an impostor and a spy. In any case, there will be sufficient doubt aroused to distrust him so that they will not try to foist him on us again."

Samos smiled. "They will probably eliminate him."

"We deplore their barbarous tactics, but we could scarcely act in his behalf, even were it possible."

The chief opened a drawer and pushed a stack of photos of the princess Nida across the desk. Most had been taken in evening gown, but there were some action sports shots that gave an idea of her feline vitality, and two of her stretching within exceedingly frail bikinis on the beach. Her body was sensuous, mature, and compact. She made Samos think of a thoroughbred mare in prime. She made him think of a lot of things. Of a sudden, he found he had developed a ravenous hunger for a juicy two-inch sirloin he could rip into like a beast.

"Remember, it is quite conceivable that she will be utterly frigid and wear blinders and turn her face away from you," the chief warned. "And you will have only forty minutes to make her recognize the impersonation."

"Why forty minutes?"

"It is the longest he has ever been known to stay with her."

Samos smiled broadly.

"She will recognize the deception," he vouched.

The chief peered at him from left and right. "Dr. Sellars will make a few plastic changes of a

temporary nature. In a matter of weeks, you will have your own face back. You already speak all the languages, but Vernet will coach you in Yussef's personal idioms."

The chief pushed over a checklist of various other coaches. "Mostly what you will need is to drown yourself in absinthe."

"Am I allowed lethal defense if trapped?"

The chief's mild, professorial expression turned to steel and ice. "You are not allowed *to get trapped!* We want no fireworks. And none of your shortcut tricks, like getting killed, Samos! This strategy has been enough of a headache as it is."

"Yes sir. I will not get killed."

"That's better," the chief grunted.

"What about his bodyguard, Kurt Kessler?"

"Kessler will be substituted at some point of the early evening. Your appearance will be required between ten and midnight, I persume. You can make your own arrangements with Kessler's substitute any preceding midnight at the Falco, a waterfront care in Taranto. Use the nose ID for contact."

The chief looked up with a paternal beam of blessing. "Carry on, Samos! And—of, one small personal favor if you get the chance. Pick me up a pair of Moorish sandals for my collection."

"You collect—*sandals,* sir?"

"Footprints on the sands of time, my boy. The history of man has been written by his feet."

SAMOS'S ARRIVAL in Italy was circuitous and difficult. He could not avail himself of the usual transportation and covers available to official agencies, such as the CIA. *Operation Unknown* was the unadmitted and unmentionable bastard born of cold war. Few in the official government knew of its existence, and nobody wanted to know about its operations or its tactics.

He was a week late setting foot upon Italian soil. He had to land on the wrong side of the peninsular, and hike across the boot of Italy. He was within thirty hours of zero when he threw himself prone on the brushed heights above the town of Nardo and watched the fishing fleet pull in from the Golfo di Taranto, that incredibly blue water that turned blood red at sundown.

He was dressed in the loose, coarse shirt and roped up pants of a local fisherman. His naturally swarthy flesh held the hot red brick color of two days under the blazing southern suns and salt laden winds. At the moment, that was helpful in not attracting undue attention, but it would not be tomorrow night when he came to impersonate Yussef, whose flesh was like fine ivory.

The last rim of the crimson sun dropped beyond the low hills of Callabria. Dusk rushed across the

gulf in a tide that washed the last stragglers from the beach home for supper. Samos had already chosen the goat trail he would use, and now made his way wearily down to the end house in the village.

A chained dog barked at him and he told it loudly in Greek, "Be quiet when a friend comes visiting your master."

The dog did not understand Greek and continued barking. A single lamp within the house went out.

"Dog of a devil, has your master not told you I am coming? Samos demanded.

The crude door of the house opened in oiled silence to a pit of blackness in the vague white walls. A voice asked in Italian, "Who speaks with the accent of Iona?"

"Who but your cousin Victorio, who brings you goat instead of fish."

"Ha!" the voice within murmured with a rise of personal interest, for the word Victorio carried back to a different war and a different enemy. "Come in, come in, and we will supply wine for the goat, Victorio!"

Samos moved forward into the darkness. A strong, horny hand gripped his shoulder and guided him to a recess beyond the chimney. Not until then was the lamp relighted by a flashing eyed woman whose grey hair could not detract from her almost classic Grecian beauty.

His host took the lamp from her and held it to Samos' face.

"*Sammy!*" he uttered with a surge of excitement. "They did not tell me it would be you."

He nearly dropped the lamp before his wife took it. The two men gripped each other's shoulders like bears and kissed both cheeks.

"Messina!" Samos grinned. "A long time, eh?"

"Twenty-two years, yes? But good memories."

"Hungry memories."

"Ha! But look at the feast I got out of it!" Messina turned and gestured at the woman. "Helena, my wife."

"Helen of Troy," Samos said.

Messina backhanded him a blow across the chest. "What did you come here for—to stèal my wife from me?"

The woman laughed. "That might be intrigue I could enjoy!"

Messina turned to a table and poured wine. The woman brought a pan of water and soap and a towel. Samos stripped to the waist and scrubbed off the harsh grit of his long travel. He kicked off his boots and stood in the soapy water, lathing his blistered feet.

"Twenty-two years," Messina said by way of toast. "It was a fine operation. English, American, Italian, Greek and Turk. And even a few of those mangy Yugoslavs. Now do we do it again? My message was from the English, and very brief—a friend will bring fish

or goat from Greece. What more will you tell me?"

"You are familiar with the villa of the princess Nida at Taranto?"

"Hah! He should know it like the inside of fish," Helena growled.

Messina shrugged self consciously. "It is the old villa of the contessa di Luria. I—ah—used to sell some fish there, on occasion."

"Fish that stink like perfume," Helena mocked him. "Two days at sea fishing and he comes back smelling like a flower garden after rain. And so tired, poor man, from hauling in the fish!"

Messina spread his hands. "This is one of the things they do not tell you about married life."

"Tomorrow night between ten and twelve I must find my way into the villa," Samos said.

Helena came and pushed him down upon a stool. She knelt to wash his feet and dry them, then to smear them carefully with ointment.

Messina got a piece of chalk and pulled a small table into the cove.

"So," he smiled broadly. "We do the impossible again, eh?" And he sketched.

"The villa is set upon a very steep slope. The property runs from the crest of the olive grove down to the sea. All is enclosed by a fifteen-foot wall topped by broken glass and electric wires. Floodlights on each corner illuminate the whole property when turned on. There are dogs inside, two packs. Always one pack is loose unless called in."

"A nice beginning."

"Only a beginning. All downstairs doors and windows are electrically locked at night and all are alarmed. Here in the center is the great hall. The most beautiful double stairs in Italy curve around the sides of the hall to the great balcony. Always on duty until the princess retires are servants in the lower hall. After she retires, the balcony is patrolled all night by a guard, except the times she sends him to the lower hall."

"The service stairs?"

"Here and here, buried in the walls. They run from cellar to the top. But on each floor, they open to the balcony that is patrolled."

"The master suites?"

"Across the back. They are identical. On each corner is the bedroom. Then, coming forward, a large commode—what you call a closet dressing room. Then the bath. Across the back, the bedroom opens to a receiving room for private company. Here, set thus, a square is cut out of the room to form a secretoire for writing letters, books. Between the two receiving rooms are butlers' pantries for upstairs entertaining."

"The master rooms have balconies?"

"Yes, with stone balustrade, not iron. At this season, the full doors are often open, but not always."

"She takes no chances."

"She should be a warden!" Messina laughed. "Now here is the important point. The villa is not in the center of the property, as you see. A tunnel, sometimes used as part of the great hall for big banquets, leads to the front door which is in the walls. Directly outside is the street. Over here is the service entrance, but it has no tunnel."

"How do tradesmen get by the dogs?"

"They ring and announce themselves. A gateman comes to escort them carrying a dogwhip, although I have never heard of it being used."

Samos held one finger up for a moment's thought. "The gateman is also the hound master or the feeder?"

"No, as a matter of fact, he is not."

Samos cracked his fingers and smiled. "Then the whip is the sign of authority the dogs have been trained to."

"I had never thought, but that could be so." Messina nodded. "There are several whips, but it is going to be difficult to get one in such short time."

He frowned and chewed at one cheek as his wife set out supper. "Helena, we eat at the big table, but Samos will eat here in the cove," he said absently. Then he said, "The mastiffs know me. They are used to my smell and voice and they like me. But the Dobermans are something else. They have

never been out when I came, and I am not sure that the whip is their control."

He shook his head dubiously. "It is the dogs. Alone, I might make it. You, a stranger with strange smell—it will be risky."

"What if I smear with fish and wear sweaty clothes of yours?"

Messina grinned. "It could work. At least, it would confuse them. If we could hold off their attack a little, if there is moonlight, we could dart them. It works very fast. They just lie down and sleep."

"You have the dope?"

"I have five ampoules for the air gun. But there are six dogs."

Samos made a gesture of thrusting his fist forward. "A two point stick down the throat. Well, we shall see."

Helena set a savory bouillabaise before him. It had the taste of ambrosia and the kick of lightning.

"This puts hair on your chest!" Samos complimented.

Helena shook her head, feigning distrust. "I should not be giving it to that one," throwing a thumb at Messina, "when he is going near the villa."

Sammy Samos finished the bowl and a second and a third. He had walked eighty miles through swamp and pasture and crossed the hump to get there. For one day, he'd had sausage and bread. This day, nothing. His eyes drooped like a tired boy's.

Messina laughed and dragged out a pallette, but Samos forced his eyes wide open and shook his head violently.

"No, we must leave tonight," he groaned.

Messina stared at him. "But have reason! We are no longer twenty years old. You have come eighty miles of rough walk in two days!"

"I will sleep on the way. Can we be there by midnight?"

Messina made a hopeless gesture at his wife. "The Americans are always like that. They never wait."

He opened a cupboard and got out various guns and lines, a swaddled sashweight, grappling hooks that he bound completely with insulating tape.

Samos was dead asleep on his stool when Messina finished. He carried their needs down to the boat and came back, and then carried Samos like a baby, and like a baby, Samos never wakened.

Messina shoved out through the surf, leaped in to scull, and shortly lifted his lateen sail of red and yellow stripes, looking black and silver in the moonlight. A ways from town he put on running lights. A little further, he took the camouflaged top from a sternwell and spun a powerful outboard motor set inside the hull.

The craft surged forward. Messina set his course and settled down to examining the points and edges of knives and the condition of other equipment.

He hummed happily as he worked. A fair breeze, a full moon, a solid partner, an impossible mission.

It was like old times. It was better than smuggling.

Dead beat as he was, Samos wakened at one touch as the lights of Taranto hove on the black horizon. Messina cut his motor and hove to between the lift of the first shelving and the surge of the shore surf. He pointed to the largest enclosure along the shore. Moonlight painted the walls a silver white and they could study the forms of the walls and villa clearly.

Messina handed him a flask of cognac and cold expresso. Samos took a solid drink and felt fresh life bolt through his sore muscles. He nodded.

"How much time to midnight?"

Messina looked at the stars.

"Forty minutes. Time enough to get anywhere in Taranto."

"I must get to the Falco."

"So? Be careful. They do not like strangers. I will lead you but I will not go in unless you are in trouble. How long will you need?"

"The less I am seen, the better. Say twenty minutes after twelve: —Is there a church near by?"

"We pass the Shrine of the Fisherman."

"Then I will pass there again, coming toward the water."

Messina handed him a throwing knife and a stiletto, idled his motor, and the boat coasted along

Messina moved ten yards ahead of him through the dark, cobbled streets of the ancient pirate city. Once he whirled back to reach his huge arm into darkness and drag out a cowering figure.

"What did you say to me?" he demanded and whipped the man around so that he could not see Samos as he passed. After another remark or two, he thrust him stumbling back into the darkness where he'd been lurking.

Passing Samos, Messina muttered, "An informer. Where I lift my cap, that is the Falco," and moved on ahead.

Midway of the next block he paused in front of a doorway over which hung a completely unreadable sign scarcely lighted by a storm lamp that must not have been cleaned or trimmed since Tripoli. Then he stretched, lifting his cap, and moved on, grumbling in argument with himself.

SAMMY SAMOS came up and pushed at the door. He moved into a dim, low-beamed room thick with smoke, and the stale, unaired reek of sour wine and sweat and fish. An evil looking half-African stood behind a wet, unswabbed bar talking with a group who silently surveyed Samos. Now he could be thankful for his brick burn and the smoky light.

The bartender stared at him, unsmiling and unspeaking. Sammy Samos made the fisherman's sign for cognac with one hand and laid down a handfull of dirty small coins with the other. He downed his drink and poured a second. The barkeep picked out proper change and went back to talk.

There were murderous looking men huddled at two tables toward the smoldering fireplace; a small, single man at the far-shadowed end of the bar; and three men together in a shadowed cornered booth. The small man's build was deceptive. He had powerful arms, enormous hands. His body was one solid trunk of muscle from shoulders to mid-thighs. He scanned Samos expertly by not looking at him at all.

That would be Kurt Kessler's substitute. He was much like the photos of Kessler at first glance, Samos thought. He ran a straight forefinger from right to left under

his nose twice, spit and then scratched his left cheek. There was no slightest flicker of reaction or answering signal from the small man. His self absorption was almost a signal in itself.

Samos looked to see if there was danger. The owner's friends were paying him no attention now. The two tables of men were absorbed in their own business. But the group of three he'd not especially noted in the dimness of the side-booth were staring at him with visible excitement. As he glanced their way, they removed their direct attention, but their heads were clustered as they argued in low tones.

Partisans, amateurs of some sort, he thought. Perhaps amateur smugglers with the law on their tails, upset by a stranger with a landsman's face burned as if he had been overlong on the open water scanning the horizon. They were husky; they had the tough-knit bodies of fishermen. But they were too young to have ever seen him before, and they were not professionals.

He turned back to have his second drink and ran his forefinger under his nose a second time. The lone man saw him, Sammy Samos knew he saw him, but he made no response. Instead, he dropped his face and made circles with his glass on the dampness of the bar.

Samos bought a cigarillo, finished his second drink and poured a third, which he slopped surreptitiously upon the floor. He was pouring a fourth for like fate when two of the men from the booth moved out of the place. The third one came to the bar, where he rested sidewise with Samos in his vision.

Time was moving on. It was already past time for his rendezvous with Messina. The owner broke from his crowd to refill the smaller man's glass with vino.

The man said to him loud enough to be heard, "No excitement tonight. Too much moon."

The owner grinned and grunted some small talk rejoinder.

The lone man laughed. "Like a naked woman in the daylight. Night like this, you see too much."

"Tipoff?" Samos wondered. "Somebody's watching."

He discounted the young fellow. Any of the others however might be professional. Well, if that was Kessler's substitute, and it was the only one who might possibly fit, then at least he knew Samos was in Taronto and what he looked like. It was not the best thing that could happen, but at least contact had been established. He picked up his change, put a fresh light to the stump of the hard, twisted cigar, and moved out, no courtesy wasted.

As the door closed behind him he felt his wrists gripped from his each side. He knew on the instant the mistake he'd made coming out so slowly, but he was dead tired

and the brandy had relaxed him and his steps were weary. His arms were whipped up in a way to force him slightly forward. Before he could drop, which would have been his move, two balled fists struck like sledgehammers into the hollow of each shoulder.

He sagged, almost retching with the paralyzing jets of pain. There was still time and enough strength in him to make a counter move. But simultaneously with that thought came the wonder—were these partisans mistaking him for Yussef by some coincidence?

If so, it made a difference in whether he used knife or judo. In the split second of that question, the blow struck him at the nape of the neck. He knew nothing but blackness until he fought back through a chaos of daze and pain and shooting lights within his head.

One side of him was lying in a shallow pool of water. He caught the smell of damp and sour wine. Vaguely, he realized his hands and ankles were bound. Somewhere there was a yellow glow of lantern light, and he could hear footsteps approaching along a stone tunnel and voices in argument.

Then his spirits leapt as he recognized Messina's angry voice.

"Of course he looks like Prince Yussef, you mother sons!" Messina barked. "But what do you think the prince would be doing in a dunghole like the Falco, alone, unguarded?"

"But he is coming here, to Taranto," another voice interjected. "We know that for sure through our underground, and this one is exactly his image."

"He is a Moscow actor picked by the Politburo because of that, jackass dogs. Do you think the Communists want to be blamed for what happens to Yussef, if, say, you donkey partisans are successful in booby-trapping his plane while he is here? This man will be seen here, and elsewhere after the prince has left for America. It will be thought that he is the prince. When he fails to arrive in America, then, the Americans will get the blame."

"Ah!" Enlightment, admiration, groveling apology struck them all at once. Two men came hurrying to Sammy Samos. He felt his bounds slashed.

"Set him up easy now. Very easy. Moscow will not be proud of you for nearly wrecking a perfect espionage plan," Messina said.

"It was mistake. He looks exactly like Yussef's pictures."

"He does not look so now. He looks half dead," Messina said sternly.

Samos was dragged as carefully as possible over cobbles and propped against a wine cask. A second later, a tin cup touched his lips and he breathed the jolting fumes of cognac.

"We will all get the devil for this," Messina was growling. "But

it is done, and I will straighten it the best I can. Be off now. I will handle this."

Frightened now, babbling apologies, their voices faded. Samos could picture the men backing off, although he couldn't see them.

After a moment, Messina's low chuckle rumbled through the vault. "A close one, eh? They are overeager—young Red partisans who lust for the opportunity to butcher Yussef, whom they think of as a pro-West dictator in the act of escaping to the capitalist fortress of America."

"They know Yussef's headed here?"

"All Italy knows. After all, he escaped his own country. The Communists have taken over there, so there is no particular reason for the MVD to pursue him. It would be, however, a great coup for Italian party members to do away with him—quietly, of course."

Samos shook himself. "Damned stupid trick on my part, stepping right into amateurs like that!"

"Eighty miles in two days tires a man. You need rest, Samos."

"I suppose," Samos acknowledged. "But there was a man in the Falco I had to see. A man who would look similar to Yussef's bodyguard Kessler."

"And your contact time was midnight? A short, quiet man, but with powerful wrists and hands, perhaps?"

"There was such a man but he would not acknowledge contact."

"How could he, with those young partisans there? Such a man has been hanging around there for two weeks, I have been told, always at midnight. It must have been your man. If so, he knows you're here as planned."

Samos sucked a deep breath. "Let's hope so! We cannot afford fireworks or any giveaway. Did you come to the Falco? How did you find me?"

Messina laughed. "Your assailants offered me the privilege of slitting your throat."

"*You?* But they are Communists partisans, you said."

Messina scratched his granite jaw with embarrassment. "True," he admitted. "But here, times have changed a little. You see, I am their commissar."

Samos exploded in a laugh that almost tore his head off. They had another small drink apiece and finished their cigarettes, ducking the butts into their pockets. They left by the tunnel, climbing worn stone steps into the darkness of a courtyard.

"Follow me from the alley," Messina said. "Turn left toward the water."

As the town clock struck two, they stepped back aboard Messina's boat.

"We will run up the coast a bit and beach for the night," Messina said. "You will need good rest for

tomorrow night, if your mission is what I think."

He rummaged in a locker and handed Samos a bottle. "Smear your face and hands with this. It stings and stinks, but it will take out that sunburn."

He pointed under the deck forward. "You will find a rubber mattress and a blanket. Get in and sleep. Today will be time enough for its own problems."

It was high noon when Samos wakened. They had beached for the night, but Messina had shoved off again before the coast patrol came by. They were lying to, as if bottom fishing, perhaps two miles off shore.

Samos felt of his stubbled face. All the heat and bloat was gone.

"Pale as a harem beauty," Messina grinned. "Heat up that expresso and we will have a little cognac. Then you can take a swim to bring some life back into those muscles."

An hour later, clean and invigorated, they made breakfast on the small pressure stove.

"Now we talk," Messina said. "First, it is better for both that we are not seen together, so you will have to suffocate under that deck while I go ashore to look around. I have already caught some fine bass, which will give me excuse to visit the villa. I have been thinking of what you said about the whips, I think maybe that is our answer."

"Check Yussef's arrival."

"That I checked last night from one of the servants. He will positively be here today by his own plane. They have been making the north master suite ready for him. Already they have taken a case of absinthe to the upstairs pantry. He will be here by four, I feel sure."

"Do you know the hour of dinner?"

"Normally, seven o'clock, but the prince may change things."

"If he should eat late, he may be half sober through to midnight or even one," Samos considered.

"Small chance. He has been walking drunk for two weeks. The princess is raging that he may break down with the d.t's while here. She will certainly pump him with absinthe to make him pass out early."

"She is in for a surprise," Samos chuckled with a man's anticipations. "Funny stuff, that absinthe."

"I must try it sometime if it brings about these happy situations," Messina said. "But now, will you need me for cover or for getaway?"

"For cover, no. If there is trouble, it is better you're not in it. For getaway, I think, yes. Can this boat make your home town in Sicily?"

Messina leaned back and filled the air with laughter. "Samos, with fuel, I could take you to America in this!"

"Then this is it. I will be leaving

in haste. There may be another man with me. I do not know the time. To be safe, let us say that I will need pickup at three."

"At the pier or on the beach?"

"If the dogs have come to, I will have to leave by the front entrance. Will it set off an alarm?"

"That I will learn. Also where the switch is located and what guards may be in the front hall."

"Then I suppose the best rendezvous will be the pier?"

"No I think not. Taranto is a late city. Somebody will notice and this boat is known. Why do I not just lay off shore until you signal?"

"Perfect. If you don't get my signal by dawn, you will know I've been unavoidable detained."

"And you don't wish me to come after you?"

"I don't think it would do any good."

"I don't like that, Samos," Messina said sharply.

"What I mean is, if there is trouble, I will probably be quite thoroughly dead."

"I would feel better if you would let me wait by the villa."

Sammy Samos squeezed his oak hard shoulder. "I would like it better myself. But I have orders."

Messina lifted his arms and let them fall. "That is final, then. Well, let me deliver my fish and make my day's poor living."

He pulled in their lines, span the motor and they cruised toward one of the smaller fishing docks. Samos crawled in under the fore deck. At this time of day, it was a sweatbox, but sleep came easily for a few hours. His body was still soaking up fresh strength.

THE SUN RAYS were slanting and the most intense heat of day was lifting when Messina came back, walking rather stiffy. Aboard, he reached into his pants and pulled out a dog whip.

"Baggy pants have one advantage." He grinned, and backed the boat into clearway. "The prince has already arrived, thoroughly drunk. Between the excitement and the princess Nida's temper, the servants are all nipping a little themselves. The princess has said that she will have dinner at seven o'clock, whether he can fall downstairs or not, so that settles that.

"The mastiffs, which are the dogs I know, will be in the yard unless something happens that they must release the Dobermans. As you guessed, the mastiffs respond to the whip. The Dobermans respond only to one master, and they can be released by pushbutton from the villa."

"Excellent. Can I crawl out of this oven?"

"Yes, but stay below the gunwale. You will not mind if I suggest the way we enter?"

"I will appreciate it," Samos said. He lighted a cigarette.

Messina said, "It is like this. There are two different ampere

charges that run through the wires atop the wall. The steady one is very low, a little shock, nothing more. It does not sound an alarm any longer; the gulls kept setting it off. However, any alarm in the house automatically throws on the floodlights and sufficient voltage to hold a man, if it does not kill him."

"I take a fair amount of electricity."

"Good. Now we can reach the top of the wall by insulated grapple. I will go first and you reverse the grapple so that I can get back out. But on the inside of the wall are thickets that could do us damage. However, there is a space of two feet between the wall and thicket."

"We'll have to drop within that space."

"Just so. Then we will have to move down to the gate to get out of the thickets. This will be a very bad time if the mastiffs are near, for I cannot show them the whip. We will have to move very fast from the top of the wall clear to the gate."

"You think the whip alone, and the fact they know you, will keep them in line?"

"Who knows? I do think it will confuse them and cause them to hesitate. During this freeze, we will have to account for five of them by dart gun. I will handle the last dog with a sharp stick in his throat when he comes at me. Also, you are the better shot, so I will give you the dart gun with three amphouls. I will take the two shots."

Sammy Samos nodded.

"The best time to enter would be seven o'clock. Most of the servants will be serving dinner. The upstairs guard will probably be at his own dinner. There may be a maid upstairs, turning down the beds and tidying up the baths. Kurt Kessler will be in the kitchen, making sure that the prince's food is served as he most likes it, even though Yussef will probably be too blind to eat."

"So I can go directly into the

second floor by grapple to a balcony?"

Messina nodded. "There is also a further advantage. The maid will open the balcony doors for sure to give the rooms a final airing while she is making them ready for the night. After all, the first nuptial night of a devoted husband and wife in six years is something of an occasion." Messina chortled.

Sammy Samos muttered a curse. If he had just been able to speak one minute with Kessler's replacement, he would know what time he was taking over. How he was doing it was of no curiosity to Samos. In this business, it was presumed that any man assigned a job could handle it.

His best chance of disposing of Kessler would be on his return from supper, presumably before his master. Kessler would be hurrying to lay out night clothes, the proper scents, in checking on the maid's work, and in the preoccupied dither of a good valet arranging an important occasion for his master. What the substitute would do if the prince sobered at dinner was another matter. But at least, this would be the best time to jump Kessler, and there would not be the additional risk of the balcony guard nearby.

Samos spread his hand, palm up. "Let's say over the top at seven-ten precisely. Then I'll play it by ear."

"Good. I think that is wisest from what I know of the house. Next, I have a silenced gun, a monoxide gun, and a cyanide gun. Which will you need?"

"None," Samos said. "Strict orders from the boss."

"Then I will carry the cyanide weapon. It is a repeater I made myself. I am quite proud of it."

They were out quite a distance now, passing other boats, some of which signaled greetings. Messina held an easy course south as if bound home.

"Sunset," he said, "is six fifty-eight. By seven-ten, the grounds will be in shadow but there will still be sufficient skyglow to see the dogs clearly."

Samos stretched and gave a lying down salute.

"Admiral, you have already won the war."

"No." Messina did not smile. "That villa can be a spider web for a man without a weapon. Judo is almost useless. Every man servant there is an expert, and they are armed as well."

He began laying out various items of their private cold war.

"Fish oil," he said. "The stinkiest. Smear it now and let the sun soak it in a bit. When you dress again, there are my dirtiest pants and shirt, and they are stronger than the oil. The dogs won't know who is who. The sneakers I got from a smuggler in town. They are American Keds and your proper size."

He regarded Samos with professional worry.

"A fighting knife is not a gun. Brass knuckles? A blackjack? Samos, you must take some precaution. You are walking into a nest of trained professionals!"

"I am climbing to a lady's bower and an evening of true love," Samos said.

Boats went past them as the sun dropped toward Callabria's purple hills; the incredible sapphire of the gulf began to streak with crimson.

"The blood of fools, the old pirates used to call it," Messina said and swung the boat about to face back toward Taranto. "You can sit up now," he added.

"I can't," Samos said, thick of voice. "I can't stand the smell that comes up from these clothes."

At sunset precisely, Messina drove in ahead of a breaker and let its spill carry them on to the beach at the south edge of the villa property. The spot was premeditated. The angle of the villa wall hid the boat from all except the upper villa windows.

They had a last smoke as the flaming sky turned to pastel and dusk thickened about them. With the end of their cigarettes, they silently shared the same bottle, silently shook hands, and angled across the beach.

The first cast of the grapple caused a brief blue spark atop the wall, but held. Messina went up rapidly, bracing his feet, balanced like a mountaineer atop the wall on the shallow free space before the row of broken glass. He glanced back, holding three finger splayed, then with a light jump, disappeared.

Sammy Samos went up after him, caught a hand shock on top but was prepared. He swung to a footing, pulled up the line and reversed the grapple, straightened and jumped over. He felt the wall skim him as he went down; thorns raked up his chest and nearly spiked his face.

In the shadows of the wall and thicket, he could just make out Messina moving ahead, the whip already unwound, his dart gun in the other hand. Out on the lawn, the three dogs stood frozen but alert, facing their direction as they came out of the thicket at the beach gate.

The first dog bayed and charged savagely, stopped short, came on again, stopped, looking at the whip and sniffing Messina's familiar smell. The other two closed in behind him.

"Take the two," Messina muttered in his most friendly, casual tone.

Sammy Samos' two shots made one long *whoosh* in the same space of Messina's one.

The big dogs jumped as if stung by a bee and turned their heads to snap at it. Then they looked back at the intruders, puzzled, uncertain. One of the rear dogs yawned.

Then the other two. Suddenly, the first dog clopped down heavily, his tongue lolling, then pitched on his side and was asleep.

The other two were equally down, but now the other three came bounding around the villa, barking, but not baying. Messina moved carelessly forward, snaking the whip high where they could see or sense it.

"Give me the first one," he said across his shoulder, "then I'll have the point stake ready."

The dogs repeated the performance of the first, but slower, puzzled by their sleeping brothers. Messina's gun *Whooshed,* and he rammed it in his belt and reached for the double pointed stake.

Samos took the second dog with his last ampoule. The third dog stood undecided, a snarl baring his fangs, watching them with eyes that glowed ruby red in some last bit of sky reflection. Messina stood braced, awaiting the charge, the short spiked stake extending on each side of his fist, ready to ram into the giant dog's mouth.

Suddenly, the unexpected happened. The last dog looked down at his sleeping brothers, yawned himself, and threw himself down in the family circle to scratch an ear. It was such an anticlimax to the tension the two men nearly erupted in guffaws.

Still snickering, they trotted across the turf.

The villa looked like a bursting jewel box. Lights blazed in every room in the enormous pile. Even the draped, downstairs windows showed slivers of light. Dinner music was being played inside and there was enough food smell on the airs to make one think of a banquet. The prince was having quite an elaborate "secret visit."

Neither of the second floor corner windows were yet draped. As they glanced from one to the other balcony, a maid's arms appeared, pressing out the French doors of the southern room.

Messina tapped Samos and gestured; but Samos shook his head. A maid would be more worried about her mistress than about the master. After doing both rooms, she might return for a last look at Princess Nida's, which is what she did.

For a long moment, they froze, stooping low into the ground shadows, studying the reflections of light in the prince's room. Soon those windows opened also. After a space, the heavy drapes were drawn, but the drapes moved so that they saw the bright lights dim, leaving soft night lights only.

Samos touched Messina and they ran forward, beneath the balcony. Messina was an expert castman, but it took him three casts to hook the balustrade. Each cast that fell back caused their hairs to hackle, for all that the grapples were swaddled against clanging, Messina tested the line to his own

satisfaction and handed it to Samos.

They shook hands, then they stood there waiting. In due course, they heard the windows above them drawn with the sharp bang necessary in beach dampness. Samos pressed Messina's shoulder, made a V, and began to lift himself hand over hand. Those were high ceilings. From the slope of the ground, the climb was over thirty feet.

AS SAMOS WENT over the balustrade he signalled down, then cast loose the grapple. The one thing they didn't want was any sign that there might have been two Yussefs in the house. To maintain the doubt, it must appear that the one who had arrived and who would be suspect on the morrow was the same one who had come from the Aegean, and the only one.

Below the balcony, Messina coiled the line rapidly, waved and vanished into the velvet darkness. Sammy Samos stood in the extreme corner of the balcony, listening to his heart. There was always this moment when the heart pumped a little harder, not with fear or anxiety, but with the knowledge that in the ultimate, a man stands utterly alone.

After a moment he removed a short length of tube with a stethescope diaphram, placed the diaphram against the window and the tube inside his ear. Vague sounds of hurried footsteps came and went. That would be Kessler—and the real one, judging by the sure, efficient movements. There was the loud pop of pajamas, he assumed, being banged apart from their ironed tightness. Then there was silence, then the tinkle of ice and glass.

A recorder was turned on very low to the orchestration of Yussef's stirring coronation march. The needle seemed to get jerked across several grooves, and then there was a heavy but gentle bump. Then there were several moments of hard breathing, the slap of leather straps being pulled tight, the click of locks, and a very faint click that might have been a key turning a double lock on a suitcase or a trunk.

Samos chewed at his cheek and cursed in silence. That simply had to be the real Kessler in there. No substitute, no matter how well informed, could move about with such directness.

Where in hell was the substitute? Had he chickened out because Samos had failed to arrive in time to establish contact? Had that stranger at the cafe last night just been wishful thinking on his part? Damn it, if he'd only gotten here a day or two days earlier!

From inside, there was the sound of something heavy being moved and then a slapping of hands, and footsteps coming toward the window. The french

doors opened carefully, and the pale blob of a face appeared looking around the balcony.

Just as Samos was readying a judo jab, the voice from the Falco last night said with a Cockney accent, "Jolly evening, what, Your Highness?"

Sammy Samos wiped a film of perspiration from his forehead and grunted with relief. This was his man.

The valet withdrew and stood inside, holding aside the drapes. Samos entered, scanning the room for some sign of Kurt Kessler's body. There was a faint odor of almonds drifting on the airs.

Cyanide, he thought. Well, the real Kessler had preferred more enjoyable tortures.

"Somewhere," Samos said, "we are going to have to find me a very hot shower very quick."

"Quite so, sir, otherwise I'm afraid your presence may be noted," the valet agreed. He glanced at a wrist watch. "I believe the arrangement is for the orchestra to play Lohengrin's Bridal March as the prince and princess leave the dining room. If you don't mind the bathroom door left open, you would have sufficient warning."

"Whether I'll heed it or not is something else. This stink will take some steaming. What about these clothes—*Kessler?*"

The substitute valet smiled. "There is a plastic laundry bag in the bathroom, Your Highness. I think it will contain the scent until I can dispose of it."

Samos nodded and moved to the bathroom, waving aside the administrations of the valet. "Just chase me down some pajamas and a robe and scarf. And pair of slippers."

He already had the shower running full blast and hot. He tossed his clothes and sneakers in the plastic bag, zippered it, and dropped it in the doorway. The next instant he was lathering as he had not lathered since after his first taste of shrapnel fire.

He was cleansed finally, he hoped. The smell, and the taste of the smell, still lingered in his nostrils and his throat. He switched to a cold shower, felt his body tingle, and would have taken more except for time. When he stepped out, miraculously, shaving gear had been laid out for him on the bowl. He had not even noticed the valet come or go.

He shaved rapidly, started to clean the razor, then caught himself out of character, and left it wet and soapy. A beautiful set of figured silk pajamas had been laid out for him, plus a rather more severe robe than the one the real Kessler had laid out for the real Prince Yussef. For that, he was grateful. There was a cool white scarf and an intricate jeweled scarf pin, and jewelled sandals that must have cost the price of a mink coat.

He had scarcely inspected himself when the valet appeared with an enormous atomizer of scent. Samos started to decline.

The valet said, "It is your favorite scent, Your Highness," and sprayed him from head to foot. Actually, it was rather pleasant after he got used to it. It was certainly better than the fish.

Samos strolled into the other room and helped himself to one of Yussef's oversized, royal monogrammed, black papered cigarettes. "Were you expecting me out there at this hour, Kessler?" he inquired.

"I was not surprised, sir. And the second I opened the door, I caught the—uh—distinctive scent of the sea. As contact had not been possible due to those partisans last night, I tried to think as I thought you would think. You will pardon my taking such privilege, sir. I knew, of course, that you had marked me."

Samos shook his head and smiled. "Marvelous This whole operation is going off with my doing nothing."

"I think there will be plenty for you to do, sir, if I may say so," the valet said.

Suddenly, Lohengrin's Wedding March welled through the house and the valet said, "If you will follow me, Your Highness, I will place you in seclusion temporarily." He produced a jewelled platinum lighter and fresh pack of cigarettes. "It is not a large space, but air conditioned," he said.

He led the way rapidly but in no panic through the receiving room into the butler's pantry and turned into a sizeable linen room that was obviously air conditioned. "I took the privilege of setting Scotch and soda in here, sir. I am sure the need for this will not last long."

Samos nodded and watched him close the door and listened to the key turn and get withdrawn. Not only was there Scotch and soda, but there was ice. The valet had also provided the most recent copies of an American, a London, and two Rome magazines, and an ashtray.

How, Samos wondered, *could I drag this out a few years?*

The time passed with remarkable rapidity. It seemed but minutes before the key sounded again and Kessler greeted him, "Your Highness, your impostor is immersed in a veritable sea of absinthe fumes and it is a quarter past ten. A maid has informed me that you would be welcome any time from now on. But if you will pardon me, sir, she seemed taken aback that I presented a pearl necklace from you for her mistress, and said you would be calling shortly."

No valet could be this perfect, Samos thought.

"How many pearls?" he inquired.

"Eighty-six, sir, blue-rose of col-

or, with a small, diamond-studded star sapphire for a clasp. The diamonds are eight points, sir, and there are seven of them."

"Impossible," Samos muttered, bemused.

He strolled through into the receiving rooms, examined the secretoire approvingly, and went on through to the enormous bedroom. Yussef was sprawled in bed, face utterly relaxed and mouth open, so that he reminded Samos of a roasted pig waiting for the apple in its mouth.

Kessler came forward with a linen handkerchief, thin as gossamer, that had been saturated with absinthe so that the distinct sweetish odor formed an aura. Tucking it into Samos' silk robe he noted, "This will help the effect, sir. It might also help to rub a little upon your face and chest and perhaps your hair. I have taken the privilege of mixing a few drops in a glass of Scotch. He has been drinking heavily all day, and she will expect it."

Sammy Samos grinned and began to understand how kings had become the mere pawns of valets, but suddenly the grimmer aspects of the night occurred to him.

"How, and when," he asked, "will you get out of here? You cannot risk being here in the morning."

"I am afraid I will have to trust to circumstance. It may prove much more difficult to get out then to get in."

"How did you get in?"

"By the front door at dinner time. I knew the former valet would be in the kitchen. It was a good chance that the footman at the door would not know precisely where he was, or how he could have left the house. So I simply arrived and rang and came through as if it were Kessler's habit to use the master entrance. Nobody here, except Her Highness, of course, knew Kessler before he came today."

Samos laughed, took a slug of his absinthe, and carried the bottle to the bathroom to douse himself. Satisfied with his smell, he ruffled his hair a bit, practiced some semi-drunken leers and expression of royal temper, and strolled down the private hall to the last door. But with his knuckles raised to knock, he froze.

"My God!" he thought. "This is worse than battle fright!"

He licked his lips, tried to force his hand, had to lower it and flex it; then in a spirit of desperate charge, he managed to tap.

The door was opened by a flustered, curtsying maid. His eyes went beyond her, across the room to the most coldly sensuous woman he'd ever seen. Hair black and thick as soot spread behind the carved ivory of her haughty face, and across her shoulders as she sat propped against a mountain of pillows that scarcely covered the head of the huge royal bed.

She regarded him icily, but bowed and touched the string of pearls. "I thank you for such a romantic thought, Your Highness."

He strolled in arrogantly, waving his cigarette in a possessive gesture, with footsteps weaving a bit, and this part was not put on. In the center of the room he paused to inspect its appointments. The princess nodded at the maid, who retired discreetly.

"Not bad. Not bad at all for exile," he said a little thickly. "Maybe better, in fact, than what we find in America—when you follow me. You've had your orders on that, of course?"

"I've had my orders," she agreed. For a brief instant, her eyes smoldered and the thought was clear in them,—*or you'd not be here, you pig!*

"And they sent the money?" he demanded, remembering Yussef's greed.

She reached to a table drawer and withdrew a thick envelope. Before she closed it, he caught sight of a snubnosed automatic.

"Fifty one thousand dollar cashier drafts on a Swiss bank. Withdrawal cannot be cancelled."

He tore off a corner of the envelope to peek inside, then clutched it to his chest with a sound in which he had been heavily coached, something between a sensuous moan and a snarl of possession. She had watched him carefully and now something private came and passed in the depths of her wide almond eyes. Contempt touched her mouth, and he knew she was accepting the act and himself as the real Yussef.

She said, "There will be more waiting for you in America."

Ice and glasses and a bottle of absinthe had already been set out. He stalked across to pour himself a clouded drink upon the rocks, still clutching the money to his chest as if somebody might try to snatch it.

"You had better place it where you won't mislay it," she advised with mockery.

"Yes!" he agreed. "Yes. Yes, yes. Right now!"

She looked hopeful that he might depart, but what he did was rip the pin from his scarf and pin the envelope tight within his pajama top. Then he smiled like an assured child. He pretended to pour more absinthe, but actually,

he only finished the first drink. This stuff scared him, but he needed some narcotic courage to impose on this disdainful princess under pretense. She was something that a man should take and subdue as himself alone. She needed humbling, and that could not be done by fakery.

He brought a fresh absinthe over and sat on the bed beside her. Sweat stood on his brow. His hands were clammy. He stood up and pulled off his robe and let it drop with regal carelessness. Then the envelope and pin began to scratch and he ripped off his pajama top.

For a moment, she just watched him, as if the smell of him were distasteful, but then then he saw her eyes dilate as she swept the compact muscles of his torso.

"My lord has been getting athletic since I left," she remarked. "I had not heard this."

"Military life," he explained. "I have been living as a prince should live, at the head of his fighting men. Had that revolt been serious, we would have strangled it in blood. Even with my troops ordered into barracks and all arrangements, that fool of a Krevetsky was barely able to make the coup."

"Regard your diplomacy," she said. "He is still a power to contend with."

He made a drunken face and a rude gesture. "But I did not come calling upon my queen to talk of politics."

Her eyes now contracted like a cat's. There were claws beneath the velvet of her voice. "My lord will honor my humble couch after six years of the world's most glamorous charmers?"

"Pah! Harlots!" he snorted angrily. "Cold as you are, you are still a princess."

She smiled with bitter irony. "Almost the last statement I heard from you before my exile, if you may recall."

So that was why he had been instructed to get that crack in above everything else! He showed anger, and the drunken brute lechery it might be expected to arouse. He grabbed her wrist roughly and pulled her forward to him.

"Let us see if your tongue is still ice," he told her and crushed his mouth upon hers.

She allowed him to kiss her. Her lips were bloodless, without feeling. But they were sweet, and the knowledge was there of what they could be like.

It was impossible, he thought. In all of his life, he had never felt such fire in himself and angry determination to make a woman respond. Yet his ardor failed even to rouse her anger. She was passive and utterly emotionless in his arms. Only once for the briefest space as she felt the ripple of chest muscles did a breath of emotion escape her.

"Absinthe!" he barked. "I want

absinthe!" And now he really meant it.

"Of course, my lord," she agreed.

She pulled on a peignoir as sheer as air so that her body showed as if cloaked by thinnest mist as she crossed the light to make his drink. For the moment that she passed to and fro, he wondered if he had gone utterly crazy with desire.

She handed him his drink. She lighted a cigarette and placed it in his lips. Then turning, her motion froze for a moment as she looked across the huge room. When she looked back at him, she was smiling faintly with amusement. Cruel amusement.

"I will return immediately, my lord," she said and moved with that gliding, nymphlike walk toward the bath.

SAMMY SAMOS lay there wondering what that smile had meant, what had occurred to her, then he swung violently and looked where she had looked, across the room. A porcelain clock said twenty past twelve. He had entered her chambers at twenty past ten.

He swung back to stare hard at the door through which she'd passed. The light in there was unduly strong. He leaped up and ran to the door. Across the dressing room, the lighted bathroom door stood wide open. She was not in either room, and there was no door out. But there was a gap between her dresses in the closet, and beyond that, a panel that moved slighly under his probe.

He went back to the bed and sat there, smoking furiously and holding his drink in a tight fist. He pulled the table drawer open enough so that he could reach the automatic. But that was not the answer—it was the one thing he'd been ordered not to do.

A moment later, she returned through the same door through which she'd gone. She paused to mix herself a drink. She came toward the bed watching him, smiling faintly, inscrutably. She lay down and had her drink in silence and then her arm was pulling him back toward her, and there was warmth and desire in it.

Suddenly she turned and kissed him. It was the fiery attack of a tigress. The clock said two when she sat up and looked down into his face. From the cave of her jet jair, she laughed outright.

"You fake," she challenged. "You beautiful impostor! Did you really think in your male vanity that you could deceive a wife—even after a separation of six years?"

He made a cynical gesture. He was at ease now. He had humbled this woman and turned her ice to fire, and if she'd read him, then he had done it as himself. She had known Yussef was dead drunk in the other room when she returned through the secret panel. It was a

complication, but the MVD would not entirely believe her because they trusted nothing.

"It was a game I wanted to play," he said. "And it paid off."

"But the payoff may cost dearly, my phantom lover," she told him. "I have already notified the MVD that Yussef is being impersonated."

He sat up leisurely, reaching his pajama jacket from the floor. "Then it is time for me to leave," he said. "Would I be rude to say I enjoyed a royal pleasant evening."

She laughed outright. "You don't think you can get out of here, do you?"

"But of course," he said, and prayed that the dogs were still knocked out. If he could make the beach gate before an alarm was given to boost the electric current, he could be over the top, even if with scorched spots.

One grab of that beautiful throat, he thought. Not a hard one, not too long, just long enough to stop the blood through the carotid arteries so that her brain blacked out.

She read him. From her knees, she bounded away from him like a gazelle.

He whipped the gun from the table drawer. She stood pale and beautiful and wild with taunting humor and said, "Shoot it and see what happens."

He knew from the weight then why she laughed. It was not loaded.

Suddenly her laughter stopped. She wheeled and raced toward an ornate mantle. He had his pajama top on, the money against his chest. He waited no longer. He rolled across the bed and burst through the high French windows. He went over the balcony, hit hard, but bounced. Nothing was sprained, only a little numbness. Ahead of him, the nearly full moonlight showed the dark forms of the dogs still sleeping on the ground.

Then, before he could move again, the lawn blazed with the floodlights. Sparks jumped along the top of the wall and snapped between the gate rods. Leaping forms came at him, not baying, but in utter, menacing silence, their eyes shining like rubies in the floodlights. He started to run, felt something sharp clamp and hold him back. The next instant, a jaw locked on one wrist like a steel clamp.

A guard came pounding around the corner of the villa. He stopped dead and stared, then babbled in confusion, "Your Highness, Your Highness, how did you get out here?"

Rich, rippling laughter came from overhead. Samos looked up at her and cursed her with an American term.

She leaned on the balustrade, still laughing. *"His Highness* had

a little accident from the balcony, Stephen. Escort him back up if he is not hurt."

Stephen kept staring, then suddenly came conscious of the situation and snapped an order at the Dobermans. Instantly, they released him and retired to a distance. Trembling, Stephen put a hand under Samos' armpit.

"Is it possible to walk, Your Highness?"

Samos muttered an answer and started hobbling. She was waiting at the bedroom door as he broke loose from the guard coming into the private corridor. Kessler hurried to help him.

"You were bitten badly, Your Highness!"

"Don't tell me—let me guess!" Samos blurted in anger.

The princess was hysterical with laughter as he shook loose of Kessler at the door of her room and hobbled painfully to the bed. Kessler discreetly closed the door behind him.

"Such royal dignity!" the princess shrieked. "Standing in his pajama tops, with a Doberman clamped on to his bare—" She lost her breath with that laugh.

He limped to the sideboard and located a bottle of Scotch. He knocked off the neck and drank it neat from the bottle. Then he poured half a highball glass and came and stood over her.

She had laughed herself out for now. Her lungs could not laugh any more. "So you're American?" she gasped. "I wasn't sure or maybe I would not have sent that note."

"What else would I be?" he demanded, still angry.

She made a gesture of her expressive hands. "Perhaps somebody the Russians were testing me with."

She got up from the bed. "Lie down on your face," she ordered as she moved toward the bath. "Let's clean that bite before it infects." She returned, quite as capable as an American housewife, with mercurochrome, dressings, adhesive tape, a wet washcloth.

He felt like an idiot, lying face down like that while she nursed him.

"If you've called your killer hounds, why bother?" he demanded.

"Oh," she said airily. "It is always possible to make a bargain. It might be rather nice to keep you around, if we can manage the thing discreetly."

"From that last alert, it doesn't look as if I can get out," he growled.

"The trouble is that I can't either," she said. "My major domo undoubtedly read my note before he took it. He is one of them—he will see that I do not leave until this is straightened out."

"How long will that be?"

"The message will be transmitted to Rome. If they take the first

plane down, they will be here at perhaps nine this morning."

She finished his dressing and he maneuvered to sit on the edge of the bed and pull on his full pajamas and his robe.

"So, I am in your hands?"

She nodded. Her eyes were both amused and very curious all in the same expression. She read the question on his mind and shrugged. "I am not an ideological agent," she said. "I needed the Russians to get away from that pig!" She pointed angrily toward the princes quarters.

"You'd defect?"

She shrugged again and tossed her hair and lighted a cigarette. It was exciting just to watch her smoke. "Perhaps."

"Perhaps what?"

"Perhaps if you married me. For I assume that shortly my beloved spouse will be dead."

He stared at her, aghast. "Marry you? Good God, I have never thought of marrying anyone. And why, of a sudden, a royal wildcat like you?"

She leaned on his shoulder.

"We could have fun," she said. "And then, there is the little matter of your survival. With my help, you might get out of here. How would they know—" She broke off, her face grave for the first time. "But there is Kessler, of course!"

Then she frowned and regarded him curiously. "But Kessler helped you in here!"

"That is not Kessler," Samos said. "Kessler has—departed, I suspect."

"Ah, a double impersonation! Who could have imagined that gall except the Americans?"

He was feeling better. He finished his drink. He lighted a fresh cigarette.

"Suppose that between us and—uh—Kessler, we can get out of here? What makes you think that I'd marry you even if I'd promised?"

"Because you would have to to stay alive. There is no place in the world where you might hide where the MVD could not eventually find you. And they would have to find you if I told them you were still alive. They would have to take you back to Russia for questioning to find out if, perhaps, you were also impersonating Yussef *before* he was deposed."

"Your word wouldn't be worth much if you ran out with me."

"I could say that you had a gun in my side or that I had gone with you simply to find out where you were going."

"That adds up," he admitted. "And it doesn't leave me much choice except to kill you and take my chances on escape."

"But you can't," she said.

He put a lean hand to her throat and pressed suggestively. "No?" Why not?"

"Oh come, *Your Highness!*" she laughed. "The Americans did not

send you over here just to tempt my virtue and have some fun. They sent you to bring about exactly what has happened—except for the dog bite."

Her eyes danced, "But they expected you to get away," she said. "And that the Russians will either kill him on the spot, thinking him a fake, or else take him back were it can be unquestionably established. But in that case, something will happen to him before he gets there. Nobody but your Kessler and myself knows that there is more than one prince here tonight. If he is destroyed, they look no farther."

Her arms came around his neck. Her body pressed against him. "And married to an American, I would be reasonably protected from their vengeance. I simply defected, and they are not going to ask for trouble killing American citizens who are no longer very important to them.

"Because if we can get out of here, they will never suspect that the Yussef I warned about is not the Yussef in the other room, who will be dead by then."

"God!" he growled. "What a man has to do for his country!" But then her lips were warm on his own, and he was not at all sure that it would be entirely patriotism.

He shoved her suddenly away. "Okay. We've not got much time left. Give me that absinthe!" He sat on his good side and gave himself a shampoo. "Now go get me Kessler."

Her royal haughtiness rose at his command. "I think you forget yourself!"

"I think if you're going to be an American housewife—" he grinned.

She laughed abruptly and went down the hall. She came back with Kessler following.

"Can we hide that trunk or whatever it is a little better than in my quarters?" Samos asked.

"It has already been disposed of, Your Highness. In an unusual wine cork in the cellar."

Samos shook his head. "This man's from Mars. All right, you ready to check out?"

"Gratefully, sir," the valet murmured. The hope in his voice showed the first trace of the terrific strain building up in all of them.

"Well, I think we'll make it. Here is the situation. The major domo is MVD. Are there others?"

"Not on his level. Alex would not confide in them. The others are just informers, guards, expendibles."

Samos nodded. "At the moment, the major domo believes me a possible impersonator on the say-so of princess Nida, but he does not know that there are two prince Yussefs in the house. He has no reason to suspect the princess. As far as he can see at the moment, the princess is turning me

in but I don't suspect it, and I am going ahead with my impersonation. Therefore, if she is with me, and within reasonable limits, there is no reason for him to confine my movements. Also, he has to treat me with kid gloves to an extent, because the princess could be wrong and I could be the real Yussef."

Nida smiled. She was a smart girl. "Playing out your drunken impersonation, you want to take a walk to see where you fell? And then perhaps, we will all just walk on toward the sea?"

Samos gave her a sour look. He said, "This started out as my mission. So far, I've just come along for the ride."

Her eyes laughed at him.

"This part of the deal has got to be strictly mine. This is not just a matter of escape. We have got to get free of surveillance so that they don't know that *I've* escaped —so that they don't know that I ever existed. The impostor Prince Yussef is lying over in the other room dead drunk, and that is where they are going to find him."

She shook her head.

"What?" he asked.

"Alex would send a guard out with us if we go walking. I take it you could dispose of the guard, but that would be its own giveaway. If he didn't send a guard, he'd be watching us every second until we came back. When none of us came back and he found Yussef here, still in one piece, that would tell exactly what you don't want them to know."

"Is there any way in or out of the villa that by-passes the regular doors and halls? Most of these old villas has private entrances and stairways."

She frowned, thinking. "The contessa di Luria was very careful to keep the private entrance intact. There is a stairway from this bedroom to a hidden door facing the gardens."

Sammy Samos stared at her. "We could just walk out?"

She nodded. "Except for the dogs and the electric gate, and that since my note, Alex may have a guard patrolling the grounds."

Samos cursed softly. "We could handle all of that, that's the hell of it. But it gives us away. How can we get out for a walk and get through that gate, and still have them think that the Yussef they find in the morning is the one you suspicioned and are with now?"

She shot him a mocking look. "Your mission, Your Highness."

Samos growled, "That clock is ticking us straight to eternity. How about this? Can you get in the secret door downstairs from outside?"

"It's not very secret. It's just hidden by ivy."

She got up and went into her secretaire and returned with a huge iron key. She crossed the room to the south wall and pulled

at a beautiful huge carved mahogany chest that swung on an axis as easily as a bank door. Behind it, the wall was panelled. She touched a place in the decorative moulding and a panel sprang open.

"Kessler" Samos said, with the unconscious authority of his princely character, "fix me a drink."

"Very good, sir," Kessler said without any slightest trace of offense, even though the pretense was now played out.

Samos snapped his fingers with sudden thought. "That guard outside, the one on the balcony. Isn't he the one that called off the dogs?"

"Stephen? Yes. He has the late guard upstairs."

"He likes a drink. He looks it."

"True, but he's cautious. Alex watches him like a hawk."

Samos tossed down his whole drink in one long, continuing swallow, hiccoughed, then beamed as if he'd just told a joke at a Rotary luncheon.

"We've got it made! Nida, give me the key to that privy door or whatever you call it." He took the key and handed it to Kessler. "Put that in your pocket and we'll have no slipups. Now, I want to go down and see where I fell. And you probably have some trinkets you want to wear, Nida."

The princess smiled and moved toward her dressing room.

"Kessler, go tell Stephen we're going for a walk and I want the dogs put up, then help downstairs. He'll pass the word to Alex and we'll get clearance."

Samos looked down at his jewelled sandals with admiration and slipped his feet back into them. He could feel the money envelope scratching his chest. It was a very pleasant tickle.

SAMMY SOMAS passed around the enormous bed, picking up the night lamp from the other table and drew back the drapes before the long french windows.

"Don't answer," he signalled in code. He repeated three times.

Out in the darkness of the water, a match flickered once as if a sailor had lighted a smoke.

"We are SOS and making break. Need you same beachead three o'clock. Give you time enough?"

A match flickered and went out. Then a second. A third match stayed lighted a space, as if some sailor were having trouble lighting his pipe but finally made it.

Samos replaced the lamp. If anybody inside the villa was watching seaward, they'd make nothing of a few match flares. Had Mesina used his shielded signal light, it would have aroused immediate suspicion.

Kessler came back with a plate of chicken sandwiches whisked out of nowhere. Samos' stomach suddenly realized he had not eaten since breakfast. He began goug-

ing. "Help yourself," he told the valet.

Nida came back, dressed in a light wool sport dress with a loose jacket that hid the fact that very oddly for her, she had no cleavage. The hollow between her breasts was all filled in.

She smiled. "A perfect fit—and I got every jewel."

Samos glanced at Kessler. "You want any of that loot of Yussef's?"

Kessler looked quite agitated with disapproval. "Thank you, sir, but I wouldn't feel right about that."

Samos stared at him a moment. He actually meant it. He had killed a man quite cold bloodidly with cyanide tonight, and he'd probably bash in Yussef's head without second thought if Samos said so, but he wouldn't steal a little souvenir. Well, it took all kinds.

"Okay. Now let's get Stephen. I'm not going to bother to change," Samos said. "My night shirt is something else that will make Alex feel better."

Stephen came in and with Kessler helped him down stairs. A night footman had opened the side terrace doors, but it was still quite a walk down hill to the rear of the house. Kessler had brought a flashlight and Samos took it and carefully examined the ground where he'd landed and been chewed, making half drunken but very funny remarks.

Suddenly, he was feeling thirsty and told Kessler to go fetch the absinthe, filling the time in with drunken chatter. The princess draped over his shoulder, a little tipsy herself—and apparently, to Stephan's eyes, and in a very romantic mood. Suddenly she straightened to call after the valet.

"Kessler, go to my secretaire. In the top righthand drawer you'll find a big iron key. It's to the privy entrance. Bring it down."

"Yes, Your Highness," Kessler bowed and was off.

With remarkable speed, he was back with glasses, ice, absinthe and Scotch and soda on a tray. "I do hope, Your Highness, that your major domo didn't think I should be doing a footman's work," he said to the princess with the privilege of his position. "I never permit anyone else to wait on His Highness when I am present."

So, Alex had seen the liquor coming and would be further reassured.

"It's quite all right, Kessler. I'll explain to him if he's put out," she said graciously.

Stephan shot her a glance and almost smiled. Her mood had certainly altered since that afternoon.

Kessler served their drinks. He had contrived to pour Scotch for Samos, barely spotted with absinthe. Samos let his remarks and mood swing from the hilarious to snappishness, and Nida looked at him with a mixture of worry and romantic interest.

"Why don't we go watch the surf and feel the sea breeze for a little while?" she suggested. "Can you make it, or will it pain too much, my lord?"

"What do I look like, a hothouse flower?" he demanded. "Getting better every minute. I could make it alone, but I'll keep Kessler. You," he said to Stephan arrogantly, "can go back to the house."

Stephan bowed with a murmur and started to withdraw.

"Wait," Nida said. "My lord, Kessler can't manage both the tray and you coming back in."

"Well, let your watchdog take the tray then," Samos said.

Nida looked at Stephan and compressed her lips in the way of a woman whose husband is causing a servant situation. Suddenly she looked inspired.

"Kessler, give Stephan the key to the privy entrance," she said. She smiled at the guard. "Stephan, use the private entrance through my room and leave the tray in the pantry. It will save steps and won't cause a situation in the servant hall."

He bowed with grateful relief.

"And you might have a little drink yourself," she added. "You've been very helpful. Leave the privy door unlocked. We'll come back that way ourselves."

He bowed again and took the tray that Kessler handed him and marched off, grinning. He had been ordered to take a little nip, and the major domo couldn't do anything about it.

Kessler took Samos' arm to help him. "Five minutes to three, sir. I presume we go straight to the water?"

"How did you guess?"

"The drapes at the window had been pulled back, sir, and of course, you wouldn't bother to send Stephan off until zero was approaching."

Samos shook his head. He was going to miss Kessler. "Now how do we get the gate open, Nida?"

"We ring and they open it from the house. There is always somebody on duty, but tonight I imagine Alex is in the servant's hall himself."

She pushed the buzzer. There was no response, and Samos began to sweat. She pushed it again, and still no response.

"We could make it over the top," Samos said. "But it kills the plan. What the hell's gone wrong? I'm crippled and drunk and supposedly, Stephan is still with us."

Nida leaned on the bell, white faced herself now, but for a different reason. This was still her house and she was mistress and being flouted.

Suddenly, there was a click and the gate opened in front of them.

"Oh!" she released a pent-up breath. "It was nothing! There was just nobody by the switchboard."

"Let's move fast now and hope

Messina's there," Samos said fervently.

He began a hobbling run, veering to the left, Kessler acting as his mobile crutch. Beside them, the surf drummed and hissed as the spume raced up and then fell back and across the beach. Ahead of them he saw no bulk breaking the lesser darkness of the night nor the whitness of the surf.

Samos cursed and began to sweat. He increased his bird hops, taking measure upon the corner of the villa wall. Messina would not be out of line by a foot when that was the arrangement, and he would not be off by a minute in being here, so something serious had happened.

"Where you going?" Messina's voice suddenly asked out of the drumming darkness.

They all stopped dead and stared, but saw nothing.

"Here, right here," Messina said with amusement. "You don't think I can wear florescent paint in my business, do you?"

They followed his voice and caught a glint of starlight on his mast. He had not beached completely, but was holding the boat half afloat upon the water. They were still tumbling for balance as he rushed it forward through a wave that broke behind them.

Although Samos had not heard it, the motor must have been idling, for as Messina lifted into the boat himself, he scarcely touched the clutch and they were moving outward.

Shortly, he raised a lateen sail, put on running lights. Then he cracked out a bottle of cognac.

"It is a long time between good drinks," he said to Samos.

Samos pressed the oak hard shoulder. "But we still fight, eh?"

"What else?" Messina asked. "A man needs some relaxation from smuggling."

Samos took the jewled pin from the envelope and stuck it in Messina's shirt. "Here's something you didn't smuggle. Take it home to wife and tell her you just picked up at the villa."

Suddenly he peered at Messina's dark, hewn face, graven like a pirate's in the faint light. "How come that you didn't know about the privy entrance to the villa?"

"There is?" Messina said startled, and then he chuckled. "Well, I will tell you, it was not the contessa, it was the contessa's maid I used to know. But my wife thought of course it must be the contessa for her man, so why spoil the story? She can get so much angrier about a contessa, and that makes her happy."

Her jerked his head backward at the dwindling lights of Taranto. "Everything accounted for to cover?"

"Oh!" Nida suddenly moaned. "Yussef won't have the dog bite and they know about it!

"With the permission of your

Highness, Kessler said diffidently. "I took the liberty of biting His Highness myself before I left. My teeth are not as good as a Doberman's, of course, so I chewed a little to make it not so easy to tell."

"You bit Yussef on the—Oh, no!" she cried and was swept with gales of laughter.

THE CHIEF regarded the sandals with a collector's admiration. "A very beautiful gift, my boy," he told Sammy Samos. "I am sure you must have searched all the bazarres on the way to find them."

The chief set them on his desk and leaned back, with his hands knitted across his bulbous belly. "A beautiful operation. Very smooth. You just walked in and walked out, as it were, eh? Our reports are that they never suspected an imposter plus the real Yussef was in the villa. He practically convicted himself of fraud when he denied that he'd been outside of the villa at all or bitten by any dog, and then they found the dog bite on him."

He leaned forward to shuffle some papers and made clucking noises of disapproval. "Barbarous enemies we face. Communist partisans boobytrapped Yussef's plane. He and the pilot and three MVD men were blown to bits crossing the Aegean. But they must be in a quandary over the princess jumping out with the valet."

The chief looked up with raised eyebrows. "I suppose eventually they'll learn that you proselyted her into defecting. I'm afraid we'll really have to do some major plastic surgery on you now. Unless, of course, she continues to evade interrogation, in which case, her sanctuary visa will be rescinded. She'll be expelled, so there'd be no further connection between you to draw their attention."

Samos smiled. "No, don't let them do that. She defected honestly. It's just that—well, she is afraid that once she's talked, I won't marry her. It's kind of a trade, but she doesn't trust me."

The chief leaned forward. Something had happened to his benign kindly professor expression. "You mean to stand there and tell me that *you're* what's holding up her cooperation?"

"Well—" Samos spread his hands. "What can I do?"

"You can damned well marry her in a hurry!" the chief bit out. "You should be ashamed! Man of your age trying to bamboozle a lovely little lady. A married one, at that."

"It's just that I'm not the marrying kind, chief!"

The chief shook his head sternly. "That won't do at all, at all. You should have thought of that before you tampered with her virtue." He peered severely through the tops of his bifocals. "It is true that you did, is it not?"

"Well, sir—"

"Never mind excuses. You tampered. After all, it's a matter of American morality. If we make a pitch, we back it up."

"Yes sir."

More mollified of tone, the chief said, "Well, I will be happy to be your best man. What time is the wedding? Two o'clock would be fine for me, if that's convenient."

"Yes sir."

The chief stood up and extended his hand. "Felicitations, my boy. She'll make a fine wife and there'll be no problem at all after the interrogation."

Then, as an afterthought, he added, "By the way, Sammy, those drafts on Switzerland are a bit tricky to collect under the circumstances. But we can talk about that after the wedding, eh?"

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She was too old to love, too young and healthy to die. But he could still teach her one last little game—Murder!

OBITUARY

by FLETCHER FLORA

MR. CAMERON FLEMING belonged to another age. In a time of sprawling urban growth, two-car garages and super-markets, he remained what he had always been, and what his father had been before him. He was, in brief, the sole and independent proprietor of a neighborhood grocery.

As a boy in better days, when his father had kept the store, he had fallen under the spell generated by that special and seductive mixture of scents peculiar to places where foods were gathered in the bulk, in barrels and boxes and jars and wooden tubs, and he had never escaped the spell.

It is true that the enchanting odor was gone now, or greatly diminished, but it was not gone from the memory of Cameron Fleming. In a mute and simple way, Cameron was a poet, and he had the poet's capacity for intense recollection.

As everyone has realized at one time or another, there is nothing so tenacious as a remembered odor, nothing so calculated to bring back by association all the objects and events and emotions connected with it.

And that's how it was with Cameron Fleming.

Every morning, when he unlocked the front door of his store and entered from the street, he could actually smell the magic effluvium of yesterday as surely as if the pickle barrel still stood, the tub of peanut butter still leaked the oily scent of goobers, and the hanging stalk of bananas still trailed a spoor of golden tropical fruit.

It was relatively late when Cameron married Millicent Hooker. He was, to be exact, thirty-two at the time. The marriage was hardly a success, but neither was it a disaster. It was merely dull.

Cameron was not greatly upset by the barrenness of his domestic life. He had the store, and the store was enough. For a time, that is. Until, to give a beginning to his decline, the day that Mrs. Hardy came in for a pound of round steak and a dime's worth of onions.

Caroline Hardy was about Cameron's age, about forty, but she was, so to speak, much older and younger at the same time. She had married young and lived hard and buried her husband, who had died at the age of thirty-eight, and she was tired. She did not, however, look tired. Neither did she look forty. She looked maybe thirty-five or thirty, depending upon the time of day and the degree of light and sometimes the character of the night before.

She was not actually pretty, and probably had never been, but she had magnetism and flair; even the simple gingham dress that she wore into the store was somehow, on her, like a party frock.

Cameron Fleming, approaching her, felt suddenly wistful, as if he had, after all, missed more in his life than he had known.

"Good afternoon," he said. "May I help you?"

"I'd like a pound of round steak, please," she said.

Behind the meat counter, he cut the steak and weighed it and

wrapped it. Portent of the future, passing unnoticed, he gave her a pound and a quarter.

"Will there be anything else?"

"One large onion, please."

"I'm afraid the onions aren't large today. Two or three smaller ones, perhaps?"

"Two should be sufficient."

He selected two, the largest he had, and put them on the scales. They weighed out at twelve cents.

"That will be a dime," he said, blowing his profit.

With her purchases in hand, she seemed loathe to leave. She looked slowly around her, and her pink lips formed the smile for which they were always prepared.

"What a perfectly charming store," she said.

"Thank you," he said. "It's been in the family for years. My father ran it before me."

"So much better, I think, than these great cold barns that pass for markets nowadays."

"I've never had the pleasure of waiting on you before, have I?"

"No. This is the first time, but I assure you it won't be the last."

"I hope not. I sincerely do. Are you new in the neighborhood?"

"I moved into the house at the other end of the block just two days ago."

"If you'd care to open a charge account, I'd be glad to accommodate you."

"I'll think about it. It might be convenient. My husband is dead, and I must work for my living. That's why I moved here. Starting Monday, I have a job as file clerk at the cement plant."

"I'm sure an account would work out satisfactorily for both of us."

"You're very kind. Anyhow, I shall certainly come again. My name, incidentally, is Mrs. Hardy. Caroline Hardy."

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Hardy. I'm Cameron Fleming."

She smiled again and nodded briskly.

"Well, I must get back. I'm really not quite settled yet. Good-by, Mr. Fleming."

That was on Thursday. On Saturday she returned to open an account and buy a week's supply of groceries.

Although she arrived at a time when trade was slack, the store being empty of other customers, their second encounter lacked, nevertheless, the delicious intimacy of the first. This was due to the presence of Jimmy Cobb, an explosion of red hair and freckles that Cameron employed as a part-time assistant for fifty cents an hour. His presence this day did not actually hamper Cameron's actions in any way, for they would have been totally innocent in any event, but he managed, just by being there, to take the fine edge off things.

In the end, however, Jimmy proved himself useful, for Cameron ordered him home with Mrs.

Hardy to carry the two large sacks of groceries that she bought.

Like all merchants, Cameron delighted in making large sales, but it must be said that his delight on this occasion was qualified by regret. Mrs. Hardy having bought for the week, it followed that it would be that long before he would see her again. The thought depressed him, but soon he was whistling softly as he went about his work.

It was entirely possible, after all, that Mrs. Hardy had forgotten some necessary staple and would have to return for it during the coming week. In Cameron's experience, women were always remembering the cakes and caviar and completely forgetting the sugar and salt.

And so, indeed, it turned out. Wednesday afternoon, about five-thirty, the telephone rang, and Cameron answered with the routine phrase.

"Fleming's Grocery."

"This is Caroline Hardy, Mr. Fleming."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Hardy. What can I do for you?"

"Is Jimmy Cobb there?"

"Yes, Jimmy's here."

"Well, I'm in the middle of baking, and I discover that I have no baking powder. I wonder if you could have Jimmy run right up with a can?"

"Certainly. Right away, Mrs. Hardy."

"It's very accommodating of you."

Cameron's accommodation did not end with his agreement to send the baking powder. Leaving Jimmy to mind the store, a rare occurrance, he gave the delivery his personal attention. Three minutes later, having walked up the block by way of the alley, he was approaching Mrs. Hardy's back door.

Mrs. Hardy, in the kitchen, was at once domestic and alluring in stretch pants protected by a bright patch of apron. Millicent, thought Cameron sadly, never wore stretch pants in the kitchen or elsewhere, and if she had the effect would hardly have been comparable.

"Why, Mr. Fleming!" Mrs. Hardy said. "How kind of you to come yourself. I've put you to no end of trouble."

"Nothing of the sort," Cameron said. "Jimmy was busy, and I thought the walk would do me good."

"Well, you must stay and rest a moment. May I offer you something? Coffee? A glass of sherry?"

Strangely exhilarated, shedding restraint with a sense of daring, Cameron accepted sherry. The sherry, poured from a bottle taken from a kitchen cabinet, was of cooking quality, but, being no connoisseur of wines, he did not know the difference.

Mrs. Hardy had a glass with him as a convivial gesture, and he was astonished, consulting his

watch on the return trip down the alley, to discover that he had lingered in the kitchen a full ten minutes. In the store, under the completely innocent observation of Jimmy Cobb, he had a delicious sense of guilt, as if he had just come hot and smoking from an assignation.

Gradually thereafter, over a period of several months, his relationship with Caroline Hardy took on the aspects of discreet infidelity—a thoroughly chaste affair. As time passed it seemed that Mrs. Hardy found it necessary more and more often to call for emergency deliveries, and by some odd trick of circumstances they invariably came just when Cameron was feeling that a short walk would do him good. The quality of the sherry did not improve, but the consumption of it materially increased.

Cameron could not remember later just when titles and surnames were abandoned. They simply became to each other, at some point in the lapse of time, Caroline and Cameron. And it became apparent, even to a man as modest as he, that she responded to his unexpressed feelings with an emotion equally intense, although equally mute.

He could hardly believe his incredible good luck. It seemed impossible that she could actually be attracted to such a dull fellow, and he began to wonder, examining his reflection in the glass door of his refrigerator, if he was such a dull fellow after all.

Without ever touching each other, they became lovers. At least they did in the mind of Cameron Fleming. He took her tenderly in a dozen repeated dreams, and it was only a small step from there to the bitter wish that he were free to take her in fact. Perhaps he

would have been if he had tried, but he was deterred by his natural timidity and the conviction that she would be amenable to seduction only if it were not extramarital.

Having no grounds for divorce, and no hope of it, he was forced to find his freedom, as he took his love, only in fantasy.

But divorce is merely one way to lose a wife. There are other ways, and death is one of them. The death of Millicent began to share his dreams with the love of Caroline, the former being in his judgment a prerequisite to the latter. Millicent, of course, showed no signs whatever of dying, but natural dying is merely one kind of death.

There are other kinds, and mur-

der is one of them. The murder of Millicent began to replace in his dreams the natural death of Millicent, the former being in his judgment the only reasonable alternative to the latter.

It was Caroline herself who gave urgency to his dream. She had come into the store quite late, just before closing time, and had asked for a can of peas. He had squatted down before the bottom shelf on which the canned peas were stocked and had asked her choice of brands. She had squatted beside him to see for herself what choice there was, and suddenly, side by side on their haunches and touching each other with only their lips, they were kissing.

After a while, she stood up and sighed and smoothed her skirt over her hips with her hands.

"I'm sorry," she said. "We shouldn't have done that."

"Why not?" he said, rising beside her.

"Because it was wrong."

"Why was it wrong?"

"Because you're married."

"I wish I weren't."

"If you want to know the truth," she said, "so do I."

But if it was she who thus gave his dream urgency, it was chance that gave it purpose and direction. As if he were simply playing a deadly game to amuse himself, he began to think of all the ways a woman could be made to die, and the game was made immensely more difficult, of course, by the fact that the death, however contrived, must be made to appear either natural or accidental.

One afternoon in his store he was stocking a shelf with bottles of a common household bleach. In the process, his attention was caught by a few words of warning on the label. In brief, the user was cautioned not to mix the bleach with ammonia or any toilet bowl cleaner. Doing so, according to the warning, would release hazardous gases which might be fatal.

Cameron stood still as stone in his enchanted place, remembering an article he had read in some publication for consumers or dealers in which this danger had been developed, spelled out in detail and supported by reference to several fatal accidents. One could not, of course, be absolutely assured that it would kill in every instance.

On the other hand, if the effects were not fatal, the instance could be passed off as accidental and nothing lost but the chance. Cameron had just reached that point in his thinking when he was interrupted by a customer. He put the bottle of bleach on the shelf and went to wait on the customer, but when he left for home that evening, he carried the bottle with him.

On Friday morning, two days later, as was their habit, he and Millicent wakened and rose together to the strident summons of their alarm clock. Adhering to routine,

she went first into the bathroom, for this arrangement gave her time, while he himself executed the essential small functions dictated by hygiene and biology, to brew his coffee and poach his egg and toast his bread.

While he waited for her, he listened rather sadly to her activities behind the closed door. He heard the water-closet empty and fill. He heard water running into the lavatory. After a flurry of splashing, he heard the brisk, bristly sound of the brushing of teeth. Then she came out, wrapped in a robe, and went directly to the kitchen.

It was indicative of their status that they did not speak all this while, and his feeling of vague sadness persisted. If he regretted what he was going to do, or attempt to do, it was not because of what she was, but because of what she had failed to be.

In the bathroom, after hurrying through what was necessary to prepare himself for the day, he took the bottle of bleach from the linen closet, where he had tucked it away the night before, and poured it all, a full quart, into the small amount of water at the bottom of the toilet bowl. The harsh odor of the bleach pervaded the small room, but he was reasonably certain that it would incite Millicent to no more than a sour resentment toward him for creating it.

After all, a woman would hardly recognize a danger signal when she was completely unaware of being in danger. He wondered if Millicent was even aware of the deadly reaction set off by chlorine bleach and any acid-producing substance, such as a toilet bowl cleaner, and he doubted it. Like many housewives, she rarely read labels.

Anyhow, it was done. It was done, so far, so simply. Of course, the crucial part remained. It was necessary now to make certain that Millicent cleaned this morning, but he was already fairly certain that she would. She did her housework on schedule, as he had learned in the years of their marriage, and he knew that this was the morning for the bathroom. It was for this reason, to exploit the schedule, that he had waited the two days after bringing the bleach home.

In the kitchen, he sat down to his egg and toast and coffee. "What are you going to do this morning?" he said.

"Housework, as usual," she said. "What else is there?"

"This is your morning for the bathroom, isn't it?"

"It is. Why?"

"I noticed that the toilet bowl is a bit stained. It needs cleaning."

"Well, don't let it disturb you. I'll get to it as soon as you're out of the way."

"Of course, dear. I didn't mean to complain."

At the front door, he received

the habitual peck on the cheek that always seemed to convey more animosity than affection. He walked the three blocks to his store, and it was then, for him, the beginning of a long, long day. There were so many things that could go wrong, and all of them plagued his mind as the long day dragged by.

What if Millicent staged a petty domestic rebellion and refused to clean the bathroom at all? Not likely, and if she did he could always try again. What if she flushed the bowl before adding the cleaner? The answer as before: he could try again. What if the gases were not fatal? A possibility, certainly, but the possibility was just as good that they would be. Fatal or not, the incident would surely pass as an accident. Failure in this event would make it impossible, of course, to try the same method again, but there were other methods, and there would be other chances.

At noon he made himself a bologna sandwich and drank a pint of milk. At four Jimmy Cobb came in and began delivering the neighborhood orders that had accumulated during the day. Caroline Hardy did not come or call, and for once Cameron was glad that she didn't. When next he saw her, he hoped that it would be with the expanded vision and prospects of a free agent.

At six, he locked the store and walked home. At six-five, his hopes neatly realized, he found Millicent dead just inside the bathroom door.

He summoned the family physician at once, who came and pronounced her dead and summoned the police, as required in such cases. The police, in the person of a detective, called the coroner, who delivered, for lack of anything constructive to do, a bitter little lecture on the incredible stupidity of the average housewife.

All the evidence of death by misadventure was present. There was the can of cleaner, lying where it had fallen, a few crystals spilled out from its lip upon the floor. There was the bottle that had contained the bleach. There was the fallen brush on the floor beside the cleaner. There, finally was the bereaved husband, roundly berating himself for having never warned his wife against the deadly danger of bleach and cleaners mixed.

"Millicent never read labels," he said dully. "I could never teach her to read labels."

Thereafter, he was too busily engaged to permit the intrusion of fears, real or imaginative, or the grim indictment of his conscious. There were relatives to notify. There were arrangements to make with a local undertaker. There were insurance agents to see. There were callers to receive, expressions of condolence to acknowledge.

Later, there were relatives in

the house, and at last, on the following Monday, the funeral itself. It was not until Monday evening that he was really left alone to assess his feelings.

Somehow, he did not feel as elated as the success of his venture warrented. Not even the vision of Caroline Hardy, now invoked, was enough to lift his spirits. Perhaps it was because he was so tired. Perhaps he would have to survive a period of adjustment—of convalescence, so to speak. Suddenly he was intensely eager for tomorrow to come. Suddenly he longed in anguished loneliness for the sweet-smelling sanctuary of his enchanted store.

The longing could not be denied. Leaving the house, he walked in darkness to the store and let himself in. A small night light was burning at the rear.

In the shadows, he found his apron and put it on and stood behind the counter as if he waited for a nocturnal customer. He stood there for a long time, and he was aware that it was not the same, that something was lacking, and then he realized that he could smell nothing.

The magic odor, recovered daily from the enchanted past, was dissipated, gone, lost forever in the acrid stench of chlorine and acid, and lost and gone with it were the thousand and one associations that had sweetened his days for all his years.

What have I done? he thought dully.

And standing alone in bleak sterility, he answered his own question.

I'm dead, he thought. *I've killed myself.*

The next afternoon, when Jimmy Cobb reported for work and found the store closed, he merely decided that Mr. Fleming was observing a brief period of mourning, and he went quietly away.

It was, in fact, two days before Mr. Fleming was widely missed, and still another day before authority could be prevailed upon to enter the store. Inasmuch as the neighbors had been incited by anxiety to grim expectations, no one was greatly surprised when Mr. Fleming was found dead in his cooler, a tight little death chamber. There was a tin pail on the floor of the cooler.

Beside the pail, empty, were a bottle that had contained bleach and a can that had contained toilet-bowl cleaner.

Mr. Fleming's body, thanks to the low temperature in the cooler, was very well preserved.

It was considered both pitiable and romantic that Mr. Fleming, in his grief, had chosen to die deliberately by the same domestic devil's brew that had killed his wife accidentally. But it must be remembered that Mr. Fleming, being a kind of poet, was given to poetic fancies.

A Person With A SQUARE WHITE BEARD

The murder had been committed so many years in the past it was almost forgotten. But a house can have a very long memory.

by DONALD HONIG

I WAS PLAYING in the back yard when I first caught sight of him. He was walking along the road, just coming to the crest of the hill, striding swiftly past the telephone pole that lifted from the roadside weeds into the country sky. Then, as he kept walking, the wild shrubbery that grew outside the yard obscured him and I lost sight of him. When he did not immediately reappear I forgot about him and went on playing, swinging in the old tire which my father had tied to the arm of a towering elm.

Then, later—perhaps a half hour after—I decided to cross the road, and look down the meadow on the other side and watch the cows that were grazing there. As I walked down the driveway I saw him again. Evidently he had not walked past the house, for there he was, leaning on our mailbox, and staring upwards, his gaze fixed with melancholy or meditation

upon the porch with its empty rockers, the ivy-wrapped pillars, the weathered shingles, and the dormer window in the gabled rooftop.

He was an old man. Of course I was only ten then and anyone with a streak of gray in his hair was an old man for me. But he *was* old. He must have been in his seventies, but his posture was erect and there could be no doubting his energy, since he walked the two miles, mostly uphill, from the bus depot in town.

He was neatly dressed, with a matching suit and tie, and a snap brim hat. He seemed not to see me, or to consider me not worth looking at, for I could not have stopped more than fifty feet from him, and I had been the only moving thing there in the quiet, windless sunlight.

He was so still, appeared so transfixed, that he began to frighten me, and I wished I'd had my B-B rifle. I backed away, still watching him. Then, when I was sure it was safe to turn my back, I ran full steam for the house, bounded up the porch stairs, and fled inside.

My father was sitting in an old wicker chair reading his paper. My entrance was not very civil and it startled him. He raised his eyes and looked at me with amused curiosity.

"There's a man outside," I said. "He's staring at the house."

"Do you think he means to burn it down?" my father asked.

"He looks funny," I said. "He's an old man."

"Well," my father said putting aside his paper and rising, "let's have a look at this funny old fellow of yours."

I followed my father to the window. He pushed aside the lace curtain and peered out. The old man was still there—standing so motionless I had the feeling he hadn't even breathed since I'd last looked at him. My father hummed thoughtfully to himself.

"What do you think he wants, Maxie?" he asked me.

"I don't know."

"Well, suppose we go out and ask him."

I followed my father outside. We descended the porch steps and walked down the path to the front gate. The old man was staring straight at us. He had a searching look in his face, as if he were as curious about us as we were about him.

"Can I help you, sir?" my father asked.

"You must pardon me," the old man said. He removed his hat, and with his handkerchief wiped perspiration from his forehead. "I had quite a walk up from the depot," he explained, apologetically.

"Perhaps you'd like to come in and have a glass of water," my father said.

The old man looked at my fath-

er with a sudden intensity that frightened me. But it did not last long, for his eyes softened almost immediately. He replaced his hat and put away his handkerchief.

"If you don't mind," he said, his voice barely audible.

I fell behind and followed them. My father walked slowly in deference to the stranger, who walked very slowly—slower than he had to, I suspected. He was staring again at everything—the fieldstone path, the lawn, the old trees around the side of the house.

Then we mounted the porch steps and he stood back for a moment and stared at the front door, and then at the porch and the ivy-wrapped pillars.

My father turned in the doorway and smiled kindly at him.

"Come in," my father said.

We went into the living room. I got the old man a glass of water and he sat perched on the edge of the sofa, his eyes fixed on the upstairs stairway that half showed from where he sat.

"This is your home, Mr. Fellows?" he asked my father.

"Yes," my father said. "We've been living here—how long is it now, Maxie?—three years, I believe. Just the three of us. My wife's in town for the shopping. I'm a painter," my father added, putting a cold pipe in his mouth. "This is lovely country for a painter."

"Yes, it is," the old man agreed vaguely. His eyes finally shifted from the stairway. "This house is *very* old," he said.

"About seventy-five years' worth," my father said.

"Eighty-five," the old man said, quietly knowledgeable.

My father smiled. "You seem to know something of it."

"My father built it."

"Then your name is Stringer."

The old man seemed pleased.

"I see you know your local folklore," he said. "Yes, I'm Roger Stringer."

"The little boy—" my father started to say, and then gave an embarrassed laugh.

The old man smiled. "You know the story?" he asked.

"Of course," my father said. "I'm always interested in the history of a place. When we bought it the real estate agent told us the whole story. I hope speaking of it doesn't make you uncomfortable."

"No," Mr. Stringer said. "After all, it's sixty-four years ago. I was about the age of your boy here." He looked at me. "Do you like living here, son? It is a lovely old house, isn't it?"

He didn't wait for me to reply, but went on. "We moved away soon after the trouble, of course. We moved clear to California. My father said we should get away, and begin a new life. So I grew up in California. It's been my home ever since. This is the first time I've been East since—well, since I

went West. I wanted to see this place again before I died. Do you think it strange of me?"

"Yes, in a way," my father said. "I would have thought you'd have forgotten the business by now. But then again—"

"No, Mr. Fellows," the old man said. "I've never forgotten it. Not for one single day of a long, long life."

THE STORY (I was familiar with it, of course, and it was the only thing about the place that I did not like) was as follows:

Sixty-four years ago three people had lived in what was now our house—Roger Stringer and his mother and father. His mother had not been good like my mother and she had taken a lover. The lover's name was Fred Anderson and he had lived in town.

It went on for some time and soon everyone knew about it. One day, in town, Mr. Stringer met Fred Anderson in the livery stable and in front of several men gave him a thrashing, and warned him that if he did not stay away he would kill him.

But Fred Anderson did not take the warning to heart and several nights later, a snowy night, he came to the house to see Mrs. Stringer. Mr. Stringer was away at the time and it was late at night. As Fred Anderson was walking up the staircase he was killed by a rifle shot fired from the living room. He died instantly. Mr. Stringer was arrested and accused of murder, even though many people thought he had been justified in protecting his honor.

Mr. Stringer denied all knowledge of the crime. First, he said he had been away from the house at the time, riding alone on the roads in his sled. But no one had seen him, and he had seen no one. His story was called 'shallow', and was disbelieved. And secondly, Mr. Stringer said that it really made no difference, that if he had been in the house he would have shot Anderson anyway.

When the police asked to see Mr. Stringer's rifle he said that it had been missing since the night of the murder. He presumed someone had stolen it. The weapon was never found.

A trial for murder was held and it seemed that Mr. Stringer was going to lose, and be sent to jail—or worse. But then Roger—who was then ten years old—was brought to the court as a 'surprise' witness. He had a story to tell, which he had previously revealed only to Mr. Stringer's lawyer.

He had been downstairs at the time of the murder, and seen Fred Anderson enter the house and begin to go upstairs. Even though it was rather late, he had gone downstairs, after his mother had retired for the night. He was asked if he had seen Anderson killed. He had, he said. By whom?

A person with a square white beard had done it, he said.

That was the story the boy told. It could not be shaken. The prosecuting attorney frightened the wits out of him. He held a Bible under the boy's nose and told him it was the Book of God and that he had sworn upon its holiness to tell the truth. Was he telling the truth?

Yes, the boy insisted, and fought back. A person with a square white beard had done it. Who was this person? Roger had never seen the man before, nor did he ever see him again. How tall was this mysterious stranger? He did not know. How did the stranger get into the house? He did not know that either.

Why should the stranger have killed Fred Anderson? Perhaps the stranger had not liked him, Roger said, and stubbornly insisted he was telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

The sheriff came to testify that only one pair of tracks—Fred Anderson's—had been found in the snow outside of the house. How had the person with the square white beard gotten into the house? No one could say, but the boy had sworn on the Book of God that it was so, and his testimony could not be shaken.

Mr. Stringer was acquitted. The jury believed Roger's story. Later, it was said, Mr. Stringer took the boy aside and asked him if he had spoken truthfully, and the boy had

replied, "Yes, sir. It was a person with a square white beard."

And in time even the most incredulous people came to accept the boy's story, for the boy was known to be very truthful.

And that was the end of it. The Stringers soon after removed to California where, apparently, the parents mended their broken life and lived out an uneventful domestic existence.

"I FEEL LIKE an intruder upon your privacy, knowing your story," my father said. "But after all, it *is* in the public domain."

"Do they still speak of it around here?" Mr. Stringer asked, mildly curious.

"I'm afraid they do. Or perhaps I hear of it only because I happen to be the occupant of the house."

"Was it true?" I suddenly blurted.

Mr. Stringer looked at me for a long moment, then nodded. "It was true," he said quietly.

"But they never caught him, the man with the beard," I said.

"The person with the beard. No, he was never caught. He dis-

appeared, completely. No one ever saw him again."

"Were you glad Fred Anderson was killed?" I asked.

"Maxie—" my father said.

"Yes," Mr. Stringer said, staring hard at me. "I didn't like him, and I knew my father didn't like him. Wouldn't you have been glad —if you had been me?"

"I suppose so," I said.

Now Mr. Stringer got up and walked to the foot of the staircase. We followed him.

"He was just mounting to the third step when he was hit," he said. "He fell back and landed here. He never knew what hit him. Never said a word."

"Where were you when it happened?" I asked.

"I was there," he said pointing to where he had recently been sitting. "I had been downstairs, waiting for my father. Christmas was coming soon you know, and we were going to have a party. I was going to play the leading role."

He paused, an almost wistful look coming into his eyes. Then he went on: "And then my mother screamed and I ran past Mr. Fred Anderson to there—" and he pointed at the fireplace in the dining room.

He walked toward it and crouched before the open hearth. Then he leaned forward, reached in and up, and loosened several bricks. From within the old, fire-scarred wall he withdrew something and held it in his hand. then replaced the bricks. When he stood up he looked at my father and then at me, apparently expecting some comment.

We said nothing. What he held in his hand was no longer white but yellowed and it did not look square.

But of course it was crumpled in his fingers.

"We never had the party," he said stuffing the false beard into his pocket. "But it was all right. I had already played my role."

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Never Hit Old Ladies!

by GORDON R. PRESCOTT

A little old lady, a great big diamond—it had to add up to trouble.

BELLE SHAKER wasn't quite the high-button shoes grandmother type, but Bud's Café on Dock Street wasn't quite a tea house either, especially on a Saturday

night. More than one shaggy eyebrow soared as she marched primly through the swinging doors and perched as prettily as you please on a bar stool, even though there wasn't any particular rule against it.

When the shock wore off a little, Mike, the ex-wrestler bartender, approached her with distrustir.g caution.

"A small glass of sherry, please, young man," Belle said, in a silvery voice more suited to a parlor filled with tintypes.

Like everyone else in Bud's, Jakey Poole, at a nearby table, watched the Whistler's Mother type old lady with more than casual interest.

It wasn't the fair-sized roll of bills she peeled a twenty from that made his eyes bulge, though the money certainly didn't go unnoticed. Rather, when she lifted her glass, little finger extended delicately, Jakey nearly forgot to swallow an ample sized mouthful of beer when, on the ring finger of her right hand, there flashed a diamond solitaire bigger than any he ever knew existed.

"Sammy," he spluttered across the table, his face reddish purple from the brew that had trickled down his windpipe, "my God, look! Must be a—a million carats!"

Sammy twisted a bloodshot, hungover eye painfully toward the bar.

"More like about three," he whispered, because loud noises made his head throb. His brow drooped back over a nearly empty glass, as though the fumes would help clear his foggy head.

Jakey's eyes took on a faraway look.

"Must be worth at least three grand. What we couldn't do—"

"Which means Louie might give you three C's for it," Sammy commented.

Jakey's face took on a pained expression, aimed at the in-born dishonesty of pawnbrokers.

Other faces still stared at the high-necked ankle-length black dress, the rose among the thorn-like dirty T-shirts and grimy dungarees.

A reverent sort of hush blanketed the Café, and several dozen pairs of eyes followed the slow, graceful rise and fall of the blue-white stone, while several dozen beers warmed themselves unattended, clutched in their owners' varyingly moist palms.

Jakey was too well aware of the situation.

Sammy," he pleaded, "if we don't, one of these other goons will. And they might *hurt* her!"

He was quite overcome. The painful vision of an ungentle thug wielding an unfeeling length of lead pipe too hard on that delicate skull—

"Uh-hunh," Sammy grunted, cradling his head in his hands. The booze habits of rich, eccentric old

ladies interested him not in the least.

Finishing her sherry with one last delicate sip, Belle inclined her head a fraction of an inch toward the watching bartender.

"I think I will have just one more, please, young man," she said in a near whisper, as though it were a confession. She rummaged through the pile of bills and change in front of her. "Thirty-five cents, was it?"

"Look," Mike grunted, leaning across the bar, "it's your money and all that, but don't you think you'd better stash it in your pocket book?"

Belle's eyes grew wide behind steel-rimmed spectacles.

"You don't mean," she whispered in a shocked tone, "that any of these nice young men are—dishonest?"

Mike tried not to choke. Jakey, overhearing her, was slightly less fortunate.

"Of course not," Mike replied unctuously, his eyes raised ceilingward. And he turned quickly away to wipe at an invisible spot at the far end of the bar.

Belle scooped most of the bills into her purse, but the diamond still flashed and was still hungrily watched by more than one pair of greedy eyes.

"I tell you, Sammy," Jakey resumed, "it'd be for her own good. Look—so she likes her wine in a bar, instead of at home, where she should oughta do her drinkin'. So that's no crime, is it?"

Sammy looked up once briefly, to indicate he'd heard.

"Flashin' a rock like that—she could get herself killed! I tell you, something oughta be done. It's almost our civic duty!" Tiny beads of sweat broke out on his balding head.

Sammy shook his head. "Unh-unh. Drunks I roll, yeah, but not little old ladies." He pushed back his chair and rose slowly, cradling his still aching head with one hand. "I gotta meet a guy. And Jakey—do me a favor? Forget about the old lady."

"Yeah, sure, Sammy. See yuh, huh?" he muttered, his nervous eyes still on the diamond.

Sammy shrugged and left.

Jakey finished the last of his beer and downed two more in quick succession. The sweat on his palms increased, and his upper lip began an irritating twitch. When he couldn't stand watching her and thinking about it any more, he rose abruptly and left.

It was cool in the night air, and he breathed deeply to help clear his mind of its confusion of thoughts. He glanced quickly around—Dock Street was almost deserted. He crossed quickly to the other side and stared into the lighted window of a second-hand-furniture store, his mind made up.

Ten minutes passed before her black reflection appeared in the

plate glass window. It had seemed more like two hours. She turned left, clutching her black hand bag close, and strode briskly down the empty sidewalk.

Jakey waited a few seconds, but no one followed her out of the bar, and no one was in sight. He walked along on the other side of the street, fifty feet or so behind.

Jakey had no plan—yet. One thing—he was sure she hadn't seen him. Resigning himself to the inevitable, he knew he'd just have to wait for the right time, the right place.

At the next intersection his heart stopped. She'd turned the corner, and before he could cross the street, a crawling switch engine pulling a string of cars grunted between them. He darted around the front of the thumping Diesel, ignoring the curses of the brakeman, and ran to the corner. Then he saw her, halfway down the block, and he breathed again.

Then—it was like having a guardian angel! He could almost thank her, because she'd turned into an alley. Probably where she lived, he thought. He quickened his steps and came up behind her. She turned, her eyes wide.

"Don't be scared, lady," he said, as gently as he knew how, watching her face lit by the gloom of a distant street light, just hoping she wouldn't scream.

"What do you want, young man? You—you'd better go away," her voice quivered. She backed a little way from him.

"I'm not going to hurt you—honest. Just give me the ring and the money, that's all." He stepped closer to her.

"I'll do no such thing!" She clutched her hands together close in front of her, embracing her purse.

"Then I guess I'll just have to help myself," and his hand reached out.

It was over in no time at all. Soundless, except for the soft *whump* of flesh meeting flesh, the slow crumbling of a body in sleep, and the bent-over form with hands fumbling.

One shadow detached itself from the other and emerged from the alley, a hand tightly clutched. In the light of a street lamp fingers riffled through bills.

"Ninety-three dollars. Humph! I'd thought sure he had more than that on him!" Belle crammed the bills into her purse. Her hand was still sore from the judo lick she'd landed below his left ear—the darkness must have spoiled her aim a little—and she rubbed it gingerly.

She sighed contentedly and strode off down the sidewalk.

"Now, just where was that bar on Center Street?" she said aloud.

Golden Crime Wave

It was a fine district for a cop. Perfect—except for maybe a little bit of murder.

by JAMES MAHON

HARVEY BARDOLTZ was arrested mainly because it was a slow Thursday, two young policemen were on patrol, and he was drunk too early in the morning.

Barely before he could demand, "What's the charge?" he was hustled into the Golden district police station.

"Public intoxication, vagrancy, disorderly conduct, resisting arrest," one of the arresting officers recited to the desk sergeant.

Harvey Bardoltz did need a shave, and he did smell of booze. His gray sports jacket was rumpled, and his blue trousers needed pressing badly. He had been playing poker all night.

"What kind of crap is this, Sarge?" he demanded. "How come you let those clowns out on the street so soon?"

"I didn't think they could do too much damage on an early Thursday morning," the sergeant sighed. "They seemed like nice young fellows."

Sergeant Alfred Lemonne had been behind the desk at the Golden district for almost eleven years, and he was happy there. After more than twenty years on the police force, he had found a comfortable, profitable home.

The Golden district was a true cross section of the city. Within its boundaries were luxurious high-rise apartments and expensive town houses, cold water flats and four-story walkups. There were quality shops and cheap discount houses, shot-and-a-beer saloons and smart cocktail lounges, beaneries and gourmet restaurants.

Whatever your pleasure or inclination, it could be satisfied somewhere in the Golden police district.

The station itself was a mess—at first look. The exterior was grimed by countless tons of over-polluted air, and the immediate interior smelled of ignored plumbing, haphazard body habits and lost babies.

Upstairs, there were lounge chairs, two pool tables, and a bar.

There also were cells upstairs, but only those reserved for the nicer class of prisoner. The drunk tank was on the first floor, next to the equally dank cubicles used to confine routine miscreants.

"What the hell is this, Sergeant?" the short, thin man with the incongruously handsome face was yelling. "I don't have to take this kind of stuff."

He certainly didn't. Harvey was the fixer, the man who knew the right men.

"Relax, Harvey," Sergeant Lemonne moaned. "I thought they'd be checking the crossing guards. Why in the hell did you have to go into the neighborhood of a school zone so they'd see you?"

"I can go anywhere in the hell I damn well want to," the injured party sputtered. "Now what are you going to do about these boy scouts that hauled me in?"

The "boy scouts" were within hearing range, indignant and adamant.

"Sergeant," the new breed of

police officer said, "we are going to press charges. We insist on it. This man has insulted us and he has insulted the whole police force. We don't feel that we have to take a lot of guff from some bum just because we're new here."

Harvey looked hurt and the desk sergeant looked hurt and several of the veteran patrolmen who happened to be in the station looked hurt when the word bum was applied to Harvey. Harvey was many things to many people, but a bum he was not.

After he was booked, Harvey Bardoltz made a phone call. He called an alderman, who called the mayor, who called the police commissioner, who called the district commander, who called the desk sergeant.

"But I didn't get those mopes assigned here," the sergeant protested. "They came here on a transfer order from downtown. I tried to assign them to a post where they wouldn't bother anybody. I didn't know that Harvey would go wandering off into a school zone."

"The commissioner caught me at home when I should have been at the station," the captain yelled. "That's another matter I want to take up with you. But right now, you'd just better have this thing straightened out by the time I get there. I'm on my way now, and you have those two clowns waiting for me in my office."

Elevated from police jargon to the strata of polite conversation, 'clown' and 'mope' have no acceptable equivalents. In the vernacular of the street, they are pungent terms, explicit and considerably less than complimentary.

Probationary Patrolmen Alex Wilson and Fred Reed demanded an audience with their captain.

"We want this man in jail," Wilson said. He was young and slim and articulate. Reed, his partner, was young and slim and monosyllabic. Gagged, they might have been identical twins bundled into blue swaddling clothes.

Wilson and Reed had been policemen for two days. They had been on duty at the Golden district station for less than six hours.

And Harvey Bardoltz, their first arrest, was a man who could dial a private number at four in the morning and get the mayor out of bed.

"These are snotty little kids," Harvey sniffed as the lockup keeper led him deferentially toward the upper tier of cells. "They need to be taught a lesson."

Harvey was a power in the district. Even the saloons that stayed open late and the couple of good, clean sporting houses that were allowed to run in the district knocked off their payments if Harvey passed the word that it was all right to stop.

No police officer had ever re-

ceived a penny in actual cash from Harvey, but there always was that monthly drop that took care of the big nut—that extra trump that kept the kids in college or paid the doctor bills or took care of the mortgage.

Harvey's connections were as untouchable as they were undiscoverable. Newspaper reporters, crime commission investigators, and other busybodies had tried to ferret out his sources of influence with no success. In a sense, Harvey Bardoltz owned the district. But he never pressed it unless he was pressed first.

It was good for the local community. Harvey couldn't abide crime—any sort of real crime—in his neighborhood.

"I can understand a guy who needs it stealing a few bucks from somebody who can afford it—not somebody who trusts him, but somebody who won't get hurt by it," he had been heard to say. "But I sure can't see a son who'll hurt anybody. Those bustards who mug people and rape people and stick up little stores where the owner is just barely making it ought to have their backsides put in jail, if not worse. I'll do anything I can to help put them out of circulation."

Harvey had a code that spelled out the difference between what was statutorially illegal and what he thought was wrong. And what he thought was wrong varied, certainly, with the situation and its circumstances.

A fancy house that didn't infect the community, or a saloon that served drinks after hours, performed a public service in its own, individual way. Harvey even could condone the stealing of hubcaps from a strange Cadillac if the owner looked like a rubber-neck tourist. Those people expected it. It was something to talk about at cocktail parties back in the suburbs. And their insurance companies charged a high enough premium to make everyone happy, anyway.

Bookmaking he viewed with a sort of bemused benevolence. It was almost like looking the other way when little boys pitched pennies at a crack in the sidewalk.

Harvey's chief weaknesses were Jack Daniel's Black Label and seven card stud poker, but he also was partial to dark-eyed girls, long, leisurely baths, and the medical articles in *Reader's Digest*. His tastes in literature corresponded with those of millions of suburban matrons, advertising executives, and dish washers in cheap restaurants.

Harvey could dress well—impeccably if the occasion demanded it or the urge struck him. He also could look like a vagrant and get arrested by rookie cops making their rounds for the first time.

Captain Marvin Bronson found the choice cell in his plush upstairs

lockup in a shambles. His supply of good cigars was strewn about the floor, many of them crushed and bearing angry heel marks. The drapes, compliments of a local merchant, had been ripped from their moorings, baring the barred windows.

Harvey Bardoltz was smoking a cigarette, flicking the ashes on the carpeted floor, and raging.

"You get me the hell out of here, Bronson," he ordered, his voice rising. "And I mean right now."

Captain Bronson mopped a worried brow. Unless Harvey was exceptionally angry, it always was "Marvin," or on some stern occasions, "Captain". Mentally the Golden district commander postponed the trip he had been planning to Jamaica, hoping that he could make amends sufficient to finance a trip to the south end of town on a bus.

"Those kids just don't understand, Harvey," the captain tried. "They say you insulted them. They're new at this business and you hurt their feelings."

"Then get a judge down here. Any judge. We'll hold court right now."

"We can't do that, Harvey. These kids are the new type cop. You have to do everything legal and proper. You'll get off all right —you know that—but we have to go through the motions."

"Here's a motion for you," Harvey replied, making one that was somewhat less than delicate. "All right, then," he growled, smashing another of the captain's best cigars under his heel. "We'll do it your way."

He grabbed the phone which had been installed in the cell for the convenience of Very Important Prisoners and began dialing.

"Yeah, Charlie. Tell everybody it's all off," was all the captain heard of the muttered conversation.

Captain Bronson was the sort of commanding officer who liked to keep in close touch with what was happening in his district, so he frequently made the rounds at irregular hours.

The night after Harvey's arrest, he found the sporting houses closed. On an early morning tour,

he found the all-night saloons shuttered at the legal closing hour.

At the end of the month, he felt a pinch where his wallet normally bulged comfortably against his backside. And when the reports reached his desk, he found that the unsolved crimes in the district had increased by sixty per cent.

Harvey had been released after a brief appearance in court, but his relationship with the captain was no longer cordial. Nor was it distant, or even strained.

The district also felt it in other ways. Even the bail bondsmen, usually an affable clan as long as their fees were paid, were barely civil. Still worse, the restaurant across the street had stopped sending over courtesy rolls and coffee to the changing shifts, and had stopped accepting horse bets from the policemen.

Then there was a murder.

As murders go, it was not a spectacular murder, but it was a murder, and it aroused the citizens of the district.

The victim, one Alvin Schwartz, was the proprietor of a tiny corner cigar store, and until Harvey had shut down the action, a small-time bookmaker. Only one of the daily newspapers considered his death worth more than two paragraphs, expanding the account to four and placing it in a remote portion of an obscure page.

The weekly neighborhood sheet made much of it, however. Mr. Schwartz had been something of a landmark.

Schwartz had been shot twice in the chest by a gunman who first had stuffed the currency from the cash register into a shirt pocket. It was estimated that the bandit escaped with less than fifty dollars, but no one had seen him clearly enough to provide an adequate description.

Witnesses agreed variously that he was in his upper, middle, or early twenties, or perhaps a teenager; height somewhere between five-feet-five and six-feet-six. He wore a jacket that was blue, gray, or an oyster white, and his hair was either short or long, unkempt or neatly cut. He also left the store calmly or dashed out in a frenzy, fleeing the scene either on foot or in an auto driven by a waiting companion.

Captain Bronson, the telephone calls from irate citizens of the district ringing in his ears, tried to pass the matter off to homicide. Homicide passed it right back, with the approval of higher authority.

"You've had a fine record in your district, and this is a local matter," he was told. "Things are looking rather bad out there right now, though. A good cleanup of a murder might put you back in a good light," was the ominous addition.

In a rare demonstration of spitefulness, Captain Bronson ordered Patrolmen Wilson and Reed

to work on the case in soft clothes until it was solved. Then he cried loudly for Harvey Bardoltz.

Harvey finally was located at the ball park.

"Tell the captain I'll meet him at Grogan's after the game," he advised the feverish-looking detective who had found him in the bleachers. "And I don't want to be bothered until the game is over," he added, returning to the pitch-by-pitch betting at a dollar a throw.

"You're breaking the law, Harvey," the detective said, eyeing the fistful of currency woven gambler-style through Harvey's fingers. "I could take you in."

"Arrest me, then. Take me in," the little man snapped. "I've been in jail before. And it's too damn bad your daughter won't be able to afford those ski lessons this fall."

The officer left without further protest. A captain could afford ski lessons for his daughter out of his regular salary, but a detective couldn't.

Harvey won seven dollars and the home team won three to two. He met Captain Bronson in Grogan's saloon feeling benevolent.

"I won seven dollars, Marvin. And our boys won one today," he said. "Have a little taste of the good stuff on me."

"Harvey, there's been a murder —old Mr. Schwartz."

"I didn't kill him. All I ever did to get arrested was walk down the street when two smart-alec young cops were riding past in a squad car trying to impress the pretty girls along the way."

Grogan's was a hangout for policemen, politicians, trial lawyers, and aspiring young assistant prosecutors in the state's attorney's office. First policemen and politicians, then the others, had called the saloon their own ever since Grogan had opened it fifty years before.

His son now presided at the cash register, but young Grogan still was relieved occasionally by his old man. Twenty-year aldermen and thirty-year cops glowed when they were recognized by Grogan the elder.

The senior Mr. Grogan was behind the bar during the passage at arms between Harvey and the captain.

Without being asked, he dealt them beer with the finesse of a veteran symphony conductor before intervening.

"Harvey," he said, "I haven't bought a drink in this joint since I opened it. I'm buying one now. You and Marvin are old friends. You and I are old friends. Marvin and I are old friends.

"Also, Alvin Schwartz and I were old friends. Alvin is dead, and enough is enough. If the two of you don't make up right now and put the punk who did it in jail, I'm going to close this place and enjoy the winters playing shuffleboard at Fort Lauderdale.

"Now drink your beer, and I'll let Harvey pay for the whiskey he said he was going to buy. He didn't mention me, but I'm going to have one on him, anyway."

"Alvin Schwartz was a friend of mine, too, Harvey," Captain Bronson said as the old man turned to the back bar. "We've got some good cops in this district, and we'll get him, but you could help a hell of a lot right now. You know that you can cut some corners that we can't if we want to make a case hold up."

"Alvin Schwartz did me a favor a long time ago that I'll never forget. He was a nice old man," Harvey said as Grogan poured the Jack Daniels. "I was mad at you, and was going to turn him over to the people downtown and make you look bad.

"Instead, let's shake hands and then you let those two kids—Wilson and Reed—make the arrest. Get in touch with them and tell them to go to Room four-seventy-seven at the Windson Hotel. I'll make a call that will have everything set up."

The two shook hands while Mike Grogan beamed. Captain Bronson relayed instructions to his desk sergeant to sent the two young patrolmen to the hotel.

From a phone booth, Harvey Bardoltz concluded a conversation.

"Charlie," he said, "there will be two kid coppers up there before long—the desk clerk will warn you in time. Just after you hear the elevator, unchain that mope from the bed and get the hell into the next room. But make sure he's ready to surrender and confess."

The arrest made four paragraphs in the newspapers, but Michael Grogan broke another precedent and bought a drink for the house.

And for six months Captain Marvin Bronson continued to slap an empty wallet, while the fancy houses ran, the bookies operated, and the after-hours saloons did their business after hours. But the crime rate in his district again had dropped almost to zero.

Patrollmen Wilson and Reed, after receiving official commendations, were assigned to desk duty on different shifts, and a detective named Archibald Jones managed to send his daughter to ski school. Everyone knows what happens to someone else's daughter when she goes to ski school.

A NEW COMPLETE SOLO AND ILLYA NOVEL NEXT MONTH

SUICIDE CLAUSE

He asked nothing out of life but death. And one day he found out a foolproof way to get his wish . . .

by JAMES HOLDING

THERE WAS A little time left on the meter, so I didn't bother to put in another nickel. I just parked there and sat quietly in my car for over an hour, waiting for Sam Connors and thinking.

One of the things I thought about was this—can a canker of bitterness working in the soul of a man ultimately produce in his physical body destructive symptoms of the flesh?

In my case, it had almost seemed so. For when my beloved wife died in a flaming wreck beside the highway, the innocent victim of a careless drunken fool—whatever they said about it later—the iron entered into my soul. And after two and a half years of its sour gnawing, I had quite noticeably become a different man.

I had lost weight, too fast and too much. My nerves, always of the strongest, had begun to trouble me. I couldn't sleep well. My appetite failed. My strength and energy, once virtually inexhaustible, became unequal to the routine demands of discussion, planning and decision which my partner had every right to expect of me in the handling of our business.

At length Charley Jacobs faced me with it.

"Rob," he said one day, looking across his desk at me, "you're sick. Don't deny it. You look like death

warmed over. And you act the same. Why don't you see a doctor?"

"I have," I said truthfully. "There's nothing wrong with me, Charley, except my morbid thoughts. That's what the doctor said."

"And so?"

"He recommends a psychiatrist."

"Well, why not?" said Jacobs. "A head shrinker might help to turn you loose from your memories."

I shook my head. "No dice. I'll learn to live with it, or I'll die of it."

"Die of it?" Jacobs was fond of me. He was ten years older, and he had hand-raised me from his office boy to his partner in our modest business. "Don't talk like that!"

I flipped a hand at him.

"Listen, Charley," I said, "I'll level with you, as if you didn't know it already. I don't care about things any more. I lost my ambition when I lost Jennie. I have no children to live for, no grandchildren. All I've got is a long lousy future stretching ahead of me that I don't have the guts or the desire to tackle. If it weren't for you and the business, Charley, I think I'd commit suicide."

He was shocked.

"Rob!" he said in distress.

I grinned at him. "But I won't, Charley. I won't. I want to live to see justice catch up with Sam Connors for killing Jennie. And also," I tried to make a joke out of it, "the partnership insurance we carry on each other's lives has a suicide clause in it, as I remember."

Jacobs relaxed.

"That's my boy," he said, going along with my mood. "If it weren't for that suicide clause, buddy, I'd encourage you to knock yourself off. I could use the hundred thousand very nicely right now. Business is punk. And we need more capital." He said it as a joke but it was true. Even I had been paying enough attention to things to realize that.

Half seriously I said, "There's no way of getting around that suicide clause, I suppose?"

He wagged his head, shaking his fat cheeks. "Not a chance. You kill yourself, the insurance company doesn't pay." He sat down at his desk again, swiveled his chair around. "Forget it, Rob, will you? And please try to forget Sam Connors too. You can't bring Jennie back, you know."

I went into my office and tried to work. But that brief conversation with Charley Jacobs had set up a train of thought in my head and it wouldn't leave me alone.

I had told Jacobs the truth. I was tired of living. Without Jennie, I was nothing. Even my corrosive hatred for Sam Connors, Jennie's careless killer, wasn't enough to keep me interested. Yet I owed my partner, Jacobs, too much to

desert him now when funds were short and business bad.

Jacobs had trained me, driven me, encouraged me, groomed me, made me a full partner in his firm, showed how much he valued my contributions to it by insuring my life for a hundred thousand dollars. Killing myself would be a poor return to him for all that. Unless my death would bring Jacobs that hundred thousand dollars.

The idea came to me that night. I lay on my bed unable to sleep, wallowing in self-pity, welcoming despair. And suddenly, with the sweet simplicity of the very best ideas, it was there before me, fully fashioned and beguiling. Closely examining it, I could find no flaws in it. It seemed to me the perfect solution to my problem.

It still seemed so to me as I sat in my car at the curb waiting for Sam Connors to come by. I patted my pocket every few minutes in a kind of reflex reassurance. I noted with satisfaction that the sidewalks were crowded with people, shoppers, strollers, idlers.

I remembered the carefully specific remarks I had been dropping at the office, the hardware store, my club for the past few days. And I was conscious of the intolerable pleasure of anticipation as I awaited Sam Connors' approach.

The time had run out on my parking meter when I finally saw him dawdling down the sidewalk toward me with a book in his hand. His face was red under his bushy eyebrows; his heavy body swayed as he walked. Briefly I wondered whether he was drunk again, as he had been when his car drove Jennie off the road to her death.

Then I slid across the front seat of my car to the curbside door, opened it, and stepped out into his path. I raised my voice so that I could be easily overheard and said, "Ah, there you are, Sam. I've been waiting for you."

He looked at me, startled, batting his eyes like an imbecile.

"Hello, Mr. Carter—" he began.

I didn't let him go any further with whatever he was going to say. I pulled my pistol out of my pocket and shot him between the eyes.

Jacobs came to see me in jail as soon as he got the word of my arrest.

"Rob!" he reproached me.

I said, "Charley, don't pity me, don't blame me, don't think I went out of my mind. I killed Connors deliberately, with premeditation. He got exactly what was coming to him. You'll get my hundred thousand dollars insurance. I'll get death. Isn't that fair all around?"

Jacobs groaned. "That insurance policy! It caused this?"

"Sure," I said. "You kill yourself, the insurance company won't pay. But if you're executed by the state for murder, the insurance company boys pay up like little gentlemen. They have to. So you

see? Just take the dough and pump some health back into our business, Charley. And forget me as soon as you can. I'll be all right, now."

And I was. The verdict was exactly what I hoped it would be: murder in the first degree, no recommendation of mercy. And the sentence suited me perfectly as well: death in the electric chair.

So I'll die tomorrow. Wasn't it Scarlett O'Hara who was always going to cry tomorrow? Not me. I won't cry. I'll be happy. And I got around that suicide clause rather neatly, don't you think?

Not that I didn't get a terrific scare a few days ago. Out of the blue, this crazy state decided to abolish the death penalty! The lawmakers did away with electrocution. The Governor commuted death sentences, already pronounced, to life imprisonment. Well, you can see how that would have fouled everything up. No hundred thousand for Charley Jacobs. No quick release for me.

But fortunately, there are a few exceptions to our new "no-execution" rule. One of them is that anybody who murders an officer of the law acting in line of duty still gets burned.

So isn't it lucky that Sam Connors was a police lieutenant in the traffic detail when he caused Jessie's death? And isn't it lucky that although they broke him to the ranks for drinking, he was still a policeman when I killed him, acting in the line of duty by passing out traffic tickets to overtime parkers?

Complete in the Next Issue

THE NAME OF THE GAME IS DEATH

Introducing TONI TARGET, Girl Spy

by JANET R. McQUISTON

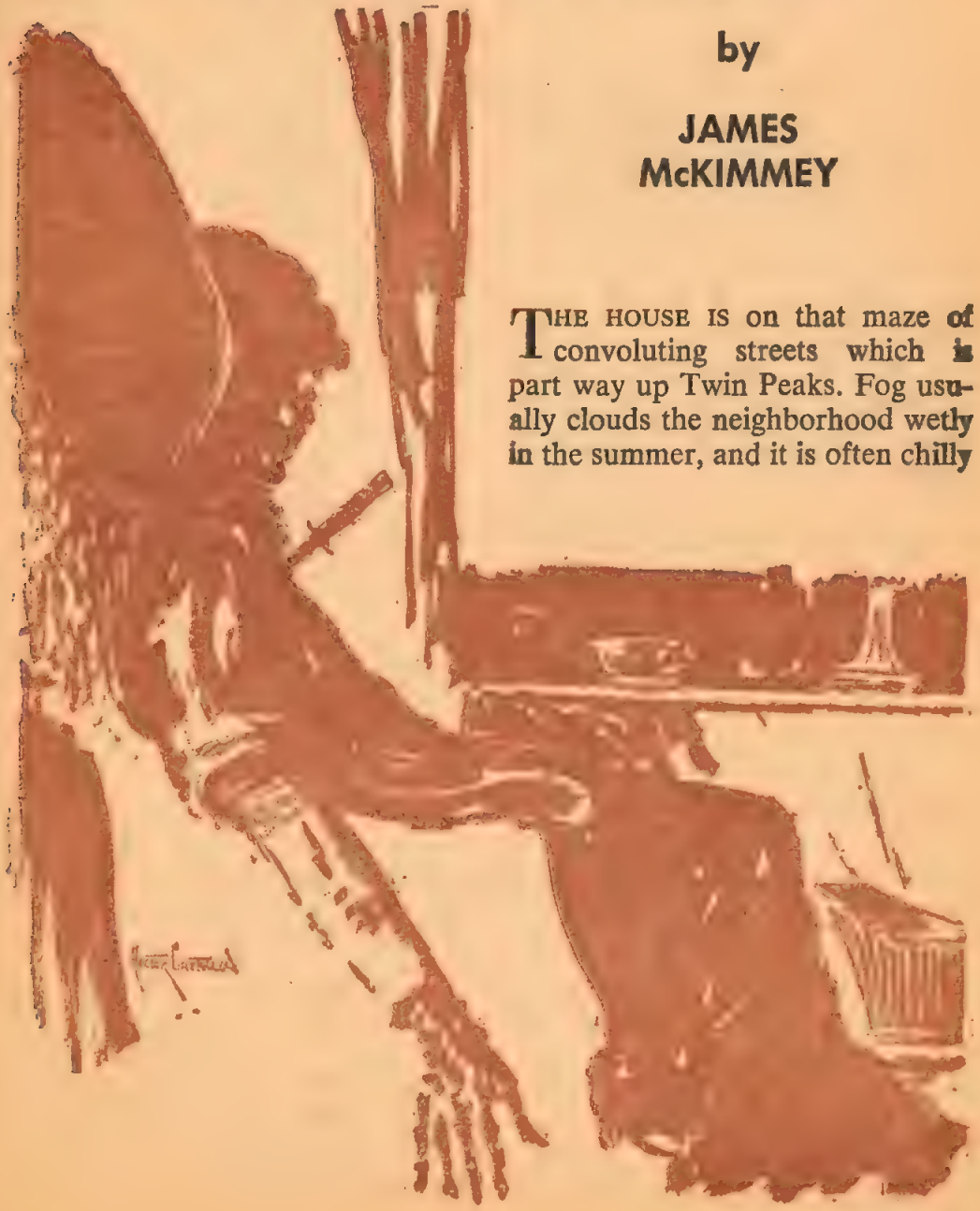
"In our racket, Death is the boss. You learn to live with it—and you never look backward. And sometimes, if the card comes up wrong, you learn to take it—and die, like the rest . . ."

Once to every man it may come, the haunting daydream of killing a hated one—and getting away with it . . .

The 23rd of August

by

JAMES McKIMMEY



THE HOUSE IS on that maze of convoluting streets which is part way up Twin Peaks. Fog usually clouds the neighborhood wetly in the summer, and it is often chilly

and conducive to moroseness. But in the winter there are sparkling days.

In front of the house is a black iron fence with a closed gate. In back is a solid rectangle of faded gray boarding which protects a constricted garden, in the center of which is a small white marble bird bath. There is a statue of the Christ Child perched in the center of the bath; at one time a thin stream of water spouted from the top of his head, up through the halo. There is a single eucalyptus which, when its bark is shedding and wet, does not have an altogether agreeable scent.

The house is of no specific architectural design, other than post—San Francisco—earthquake. It is two-storied, flat-fronted and painted a white that has grayed with time. The windows are shaded. No one in the neighborhood can remember when they have not been, though it is not the sort of street where neighbors tend to watch each other very much.

On the 23rd of August, 1965, inside the house, Harold Harris paced back and forth in front of a closed second-floor bedroom door. The hallway was covered with a worn flower runner, which led to the narrow stairway. There was another bedroom door, which was open, and a bath. Harold, whose thick forty-year-old torso was pressed tightly into a soft, green corduroy jacket, stared angrily at the closed door. "I'm not listening to you any more. Do you hear that?"

He stopped and waited for the response. He could imagine her in there, seated in her Queen Anne rocker with its rose-patterned cushion. There would be the high-posted bed with its fine embroidered spread. Her desk, a black teakwood with very thin legs, would be arranged neatly, with the leaves of the calendar efficiently turned to the correct date. There would be the violet-tinged scent of her face powder and the stronger scent of her perfume. And she—patrician-noble face with its halo of white hair—would be holding her chin up firmly, undaunted by his threat, firm in the knowledge that he would quit this foolishness momentarily.

"I'm telling you," he called, "I am my own master. And you—you can—" He could not say it loudly, but he whispered, ". . . go to hell."

Having said it, he waited, frightened now. But she said not a word, and he marched down the hall into his own room, where he slammed the door behind him.

He lay down on the bed, flat on his back, right on the white spread, with his shoes on. The furniture in the room was maple and rather small-sized. There was a littered desk with a world globe, as well as a scale-sized 1831 De Witt Clinton locomotive. Hanging just above

from a thin wire was a balsa-and-tissue replica of a Curtis Eagle passenger plane; the tissue was dusty and the wings were warped. He closed his eyes against that, infuriated.

It was a Tuesday, he thought. But that was not important. It was the month. And the exact date. And then he remembered: the 23rd of August. That was important. But why?

He pressed knuckles against his closed lids. Then he got up and returned to the hall, where he called, "You're not telling me what to do the rest of my life!"

She wouldn't answer him. She never had, when he was angry, not since he had been a small boy. She would stare above his head in tolerant silence, knowing that soon his tantrum would end. Oh, yes? He returned to his room and flung himself on the bed again. Then he saw it, deliciously, feeling himself quivering.

In his mind's eyes, he was walking down the stairway, into the small kitchen, to slide the knife from its wall holder. It was her special knife: straight-bladed, made of Swedish steel, scalpel-sharp along one side to the tip where the sharpness returned along the back of the blade, perhaps two inches. It was just over a foot long from tip to smoothly carved handle. She dismembered chickens at the speed of light with it. That was the knife he wanted.

In the freedom of his imagination, he reclimbed the stairway and carefully opened the door to her bedroom, holding the knife behind his back. She was sitting in her rocker, with a small leather-bound copy of Byron in her lap. She was wearing a blue house dress and a rather thick white cotton knitted sweater; it was always just a bit chilly in that room. The day was gray outside, but light from her reading lamp made her hair shine.

"Mamma," he said, "do you know what day it is?"

She looked at him with eyes beginning to sparkle, although she carefully turned her face into a faint expression of surprise. "Why, let's see. No. I don't believe I do, Harold."

But he saw that her calendar was turned to the right date, and she knew very well what day it was.

"It is the twenty-third of August," he said.

"Well, my goodness!" Her lashes fluttered. "It is, isn't it?"

"Happy birthday, Mamma. I've got a present for you."

"Isn't that wonderful, darling. Whatever is it?"

He brought the knife around from in back.

"This," he said, and plunged it into her breast. Because he gave it such a strong thrust, it went through her heart, cracked through bone, and then impaled its surgically sharp tip into the solid wood splat of the rocker.

She made a noise and that stopped. The rocker tipped back and forth, back and forth; then that stopped too. Her head flopped down over the blood spreading over the blue dress and the white sweater. She was quite motionless then, pegged into position by the knife . . .

He opened his eyes and the daydream was over. He bit his lips, disappointed as he might have been upon awakening from a real dream which had been so delightful. He looked through a window across the room and saw that it was becoming dark. His mind had been turning rapidly, and now he was suddenly thinking of Sally Munson.

He had not thought of Sally in some time, and now he saw her face, pleasant and plump and smoothly plain. He saw her totally, with her rather matronly body, dressed always in simple, mature dresses. He had met her when? He couldn't remember that, but he remembered where: at one of the evening meetings at the church.

Whenever he and Mamma had ice cream and coffee together, he thought of Sally; he'd first spoken to her when she'd sat down beside him—he'd had the creamy taste of vanila ice cream in his mouth and the strong aroma of freshly brewed coffee in his nostrils.

He walked out into the hallway again.

"Harold?" The voice sifted softly but audibly through her bedroom door.

He stopped, frozen, his heart beating fast. He did not answer.

"Harold, have you forgotten what day this is?"

Still he would not answer.

"Darling, do you want to go down and make Mamma a nice pot of mint tea? To make her happy?"

He went down the stairs in a clumsy run, into the kitchen. Sweating a little, he began opening cupboard doors, one after another. He was not looking for the tea. Finally he found what he was looking for, in a milk-white vase: five bills tucked carefully into the bottom. He pulled them out and unfolded them. There was a total of twenty-five dollars. Her grocery money, he thought.

He put it in his wallet, and then slammed shut all of the cupboard doors. He went to the foot of the stairway and listened.

"Darling?" he heard distantly. "Aren't we going to have a nice tea together?"

He walked through the living room with its dark furniture and chintz curtains, the shades pulled behind them. He opened the front door, set the night lock, and stepped outside, banging the door shut behind him.

The air was cool, and he could see the mist in the glow around the street lights. A car went down the hill, its tires making a wet, whirring sound. He went through the

gate and then down the street, his heavy, awkward body pitched forward by the slant.

He made his way along the twisting streets all the way down to Market Street, where, legs tired, he climbed aboard an electric tram. It ran with the silence of a steel ball rolling over hard, polished wood, its windows dripping with moisture.

At Seventh Street he got off and looked about uncertainly. The wide downtown street stretched toward the Bay, illuminated by street lamps, neon signs and the flare of automobile lights. The sidewalks on eitherside were busy with people. He started walking again, feeling the damp cold now, wishing that he'd brought a coat. At the entrance to a bar, he stopped.

"Harold?"

He turned quickly, looking all around. He saw, finally, an elderly woman moving slowly toward him. She wore a black coat and was quite small. She had a pale patrician face beneath a black hat. He was certain that he could smell violet-scented powder and the stronger aroma of that familiar perfume . . .

"Harold?" he heard in the soft but penetrating voice. "I want you to promise me that you'll never take a drink stronger than tea the rest of your life. Do you hear, Harold?"

He hunched his shoulders defensively. He watched the mouth of the approaching woman, but he could not see it moving. Yet he could hear:

"You must promise me, Harold. You see, your father made good money before he died. He left us enough, darling, that we'll never have to give up our lovely house or worry or even be apart

from each other. You'll never have to work, Harold, and that means that you can stay home with Mamma forever. But you must also understand that your father was a victim of drink. It didn't kill him—that was his heart, you know. But it ruined our lives while he lived. Never, never take a drink, Harold. Not as long as you live."

The woman was almost upon him now. He turned sideways, almost as though expecting a blow from her, though his mother had never struck him. He waited like that, apprehensively; then she had passed him and was moving on down the street.

When he could see her no longer, he plunged into the bar, as though diving into cold water.

There was a very long U-shaped bar and a musky smell of beer. A dozen people were seated in the murky light. Harold walked to an empty stool and sat down. A bartender with old-fashioned arm bands came over and looked at him.

"I want a drink," Harold said.

"Whiskey? What?"

"Whiskey," Harold said decisively.

The bartender put a shot glass before him and poured whiskey into it until some spilled over the sides. "Water on the side?"

"I don't care."

The bartender looked at him again, then put a glass of water beside the shot glass. He made change, left it on the bar, and walked away. Harold looked at the amber liquid in the small glass.

"Harold?" he heard.

He looked about the bar. There was only one woman, seated across the U from him. She was plump and wore a lot of make-up. When he looked at her she smiled at him. She hadn't said it. He was certain of that.

He put his fingers around the shot glass.

"Harold!" he heard again.

He lifted the glass swiftly, opened his mouth and poured the whiskey down, feeling it harsh and fiery against his throat, a shock to his taste. He coughed, then understood what the water was for. He drank all there was in the glass. Then he sat there as the bartender came back and held the whiskey bottle up. Harold nodded. The shot glass and the water glass were refilled.

Harold had three drinks. The woman across the U kept smiling at him through the dim light. Those were the first drinks he'd ever had in his life, and he felt as though he were on a swing now, moving back and forth, high above the ground. That woman, he thought, reminded him of Sally Munson. It was the way she was shaped: with full shoulders and heavy at the breasts.

He ordered another drink and felt the same sensation he'd felt when he'd been near Sally. Then he heard the voice again, soft but firm:

"Harold, I've never wanted to tell you. Never. But since you've been seeing so much of Sally Munson, I think it's time. Do you remember when you were a little boy, just after your father died, when I told you that you must never, never show disrespect to girls? I was honest and frank, wasn't I? And I told you exactly what I meant. That you should always have clean thoughts. I don't want you to be like your father, Harold.

"Because, well, he was like an animal sometimes. I'm sorry, dear. But I have to tell you. So you'll never be ashamed of yourself. Now, I think you know your Mamma has always been as pure as she can be. And there was no reason

for your father to be the way he was. I've always prayed and gone to church when I could, and I was the one who saved the money, even before your father was making very much, to have that beautiful statue of the Christ Child made for the bird bath. But, Harold, there are other kinds of women in this world. Terrible women, who do their best to excite men into being beasts. Now to look at Sally Munson, you wouldn't think—"

The bartender refilled his glass. He drank quickly. The voice was his imagination working, he knew. Maybe the whiskey would make it go away.

He looked across the bar again, and the woman was gone. Then, head swimming, he realized that she'd gotten up and was coming around toward him. She stopped and said in a husky voice, "Don't you want to buy me a drink, honey?"

No, he thought, she didn't look like Sally at all. What could he have been thinking?

"He doesn't want to be bothered, Donna," said the bartender. The woman shrugged and walked back to her stool.

"You want another?" the bartender asked.

Harold shook his head. He stood up, catching the edge of the bar to steady himself. The woman stared archly away from him. He saw a telephone booth at the side of the room and walked toward it, feeling as though he were floating. He could only think of one thing now: Sally Munson.

He sat down in the booth and closed his eyes, trying to remember her telephone number. He hadn't called her in days, maybe weeks. Then finally he remembered. He got a dime from his change and dialed. In a moment a familiar voice answered:

"Hello?"

He stared with blurred eyes at the mouthpiece as though he could see along the line to the person at the other end.

"Harold?" the soft, firm voice said. "Where are you? Why did you leave me?"

"Mamma!" he whispered angrily.

"Harold, I want you to come home. Don't you know what day it is? There's no use being foolish this way."

He hung up. He sat in the booth with the door closed. It was stuffy, and his head prickled with perspiration, so that he felt even more light-headed. Then he knew what had happened. He had been thinking of Sally's number, but instead he'd dialed the number at home. Mamma had answered. All right, he thought. Let her worry! Who cared what day it was!

He dialed again, this time very carefully. A man answered: "Yes?"

"Is Sally there?"

"No. Who's calling?"

"Is it Mr. Munson? This is Harold."

"Harold! Well, yes. It's Mr. Munson. Sally isn't here. But I'll give you her number, Harold." Mr. Munson gave him the number, and Harold thanked him and hung up. He found another dime in his pocket and dialed. The buzz sounded four times, then she answered.

"Sally? This is Harold."

There was a long silence. Then finally she said, "Harold? Is it really you?"

"Yes. It's Harold, all right. How are you, Sally?"

"I'm just fine, Harold. How are you? You don't sound like yourself."

"Oh, I'm fine. I just thought I'd phone."

"Are you all right, Harold?"

"I said I was fine, didn't I? I'm downtown. I thought maybe you could come down and meet me. Could you do that, Sally?"

"Well, but, Harold. I don't think you understand. How did you find my number?"

"Your father gave it to me. Are you living alone now, Sally? Maybe I could come over there."

"Harold, I'm married!"

Very slowly he felt the anger hightening the warmth the liquor had already given his face. "Married?"

"Yes,Harold."

"Well , what did you do that for? I don't see how you could do that! I mean, we never said anything. But I thought you understood. Married!"

"Harold, are you sure you're all right? You sound so funny."

"I'm not funny. What right did you have to get married?"

Finally she said, "Harold, you know I thought such a great deal of you. You must have known that. Oh, I know your mother didn't care for me. But I was certain you did. I was so very certain. Then you said you had something very important to tell me. And you were going to call me the next day, and it was going to be your mother's birthday? I waited and waited, and you never called, Harold. I tried to call you. Several times. But nobody answered. What could I do? I finally met a very nice gentleman, and now we've adopted a darling little boy. And—"

"Why didn't you wait for me to call!" His voice was quite loud.

"Harold, that was *five years ago!*"

His eyes narrowed. He shook his head. He hung up. Five years ago? That was a lie!

He went out of the bar into the cold, wet air. He looked around, fiercely. Then he weaved his way down the street. People looked at him without interest. He bumped into an elderly man, and heard the man calling sharply after him. But he kept going, knowing they were all against him. The people on this street and Sally and Mamma. Why?

On a street running off Market,

he saw a small hotel sign. He walked toward it, the air cool and damp against his flushed face. He stepped into the small lobby and stood before the desk. Mamma had been right about Sally, all right, he thought. But that didn't change anything. He was sick of Mamma too. And she could worry her head off about him. He wasn't going home—ever.

The desk clerk looked at him carefully.

"How much is a room?" he asked.

"Five dollars."

"I'll take one."

"With no bags, it'll have to be in advance."

"I've got money," he said. "I can write a check too. I've got a lot of money in the bank. I'll never have to work, not as long as I live."

"That's fine. But I'll take the money."

He paid and signed. The clerk slid a key to him across the desk. "Elevator's back there."

He got into the elevator and pressed the button indicating his floor. Moments later he got out to walk down the hall to the room number matching his key. He unlocked the door and went in. The room was small. There was a narrow bed and a single chair and a night table supporting a telephone. The single window looked out into an air shaft and the window was dirty. It was all right, he thought. It was the best place he'd ever been in, because he was free here. Nobody knew where he was, including Mamma.

It was very warm in the room, and once again his head started swimming. He took off his shoes and lay down on the bed. This was his place now, and he would take care of it, including taking off his shoes when he lay down on the bed.

He just lay there, quietly, feeling very secure and good for perhaps fifteen minutes, and he could feel his soul spiraling away, freed, upward and upward. And then the telephone rang.

He stared at it. It rang again.

"No," he whispered. But it rang again. Finally he picked it up.

"Harold?"

He looked up at the ceiling, not believing it.

"Harold, don't you think it's time to end all of this foolishness and come home? Mamma's waiting."

"How did you know where I was!"

"Harold, haven't you learned yet? That Mamma always knows? You can't fool Mamma, dear. Ever."

He lay staring at the ceiling. Her voice suddenly sounded so gentle and persuasive, and he found himself very lonely in the strange room. He didn't like this room, he decided. Not at all.

"Harold," she said, "are you coming home now? Mamma won't

punish you. She promises. You come home, like a good boy. And she'll never say a word about this. Are you coming, dear?"

"Yes," he said.

He got up and put on his shoes and looked at his watch. It was only 10:15, and that meant, he thought, brightening, it would still be her birthday, until midnight.

He went down and hurried outside to walk back toward Market Street, his head clearing surprisingly fast, now that he was in the air again. When he saw a flower stand, he smiled and stopped there, asking the attendant to make up a bouquet of violets. Then he carried them, covered with plastic, to a tram stop. When it came along, he got aboard and rode to the foot of Twin Peaks. He got off there and hurried as fast as he could up the winding streets to the black iron fence.

Inside the house, he stopped when he heard:

"Harold, is that you? Have you come home, darling?"

He smiled happily and went into the kitchen, where he unwrapped the flowers and put them in the milk vase. Tomorrow, he thought, he would write a check for enough money to put back all of the twenty-five dollars when he went shopping for the groceries.

He started water boiling on the stove. While that was being done, he washed his face with cold water from the sink tap. It gave him a scrubbed little-boy look, and she always liked that. He put some of the water on his hair and combed it. Then he wiped his hands carefully and put the mint tea leaves in the pot and poured the boiling water over them.

He placed the tea pot, with two cups, on a tray. Then he placed the milk vase containing the flowers beside them. He lifted the tray and went up the stairway. When he got to her door, he balanced the tray with one hand and knocked lightly.

"Come in, darling."

He opened the door, smiling brightly. "Happy birthday, Mamma!" He put the tray down on a small round table just beside her rocker. He looked at her with merry eyes. Then he went over to her desk and looked at the calendar. The date on the upturned leaf read: "August 23, 1960." He laughed with delight, and drew a chair up beside the table, to sit down beside her.

"It's your birthday, all right," he said. "And you knew it all along, didn't you, Mamma?"

He laughed again, and poured tea into the cups. Then he leaned back contentedly. She, what was left of her within the blue dress and white sweater, pegged into position by that surgically sharp knife, remained just as she had for the last five years; and the tea grew cold.

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